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A Stolen Peer

By

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"Dr. Nikola," "A Brighton Tragedy,"
"A Desperate Conspiracy," "An Ocean Secret,"
etc., etc.



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A STOLEN PEER

CHAPTER I

THE cold grey fog from the sea rolled up the beautiful valley of the Bexe—for all the world as if it were determined to smother it and never to let an acre of it be seen again. As a matter of fact it was such a fog as no man in the neighbourhood could remember, not even excepting old Collet, the “Pike Keeper,” as he was still called, though, thank Heaven, turnpikes have long since been relegated to the lumber room of the past. It shut out Charleford House, that beautiful home of the Bingham-Tracies; it threw an impervious curtain over Belford Manor, with its winding river and avenue of stately oaks, which latter, as tradition says, saw the Conqueror in their youth and many other illustrious folk in the meantime. Taken big and large, as the sea phrase goes, it was just the sort of fog one would be likely to remember one’s life long and to talk about so that it might be handed down to one’s grandchildren afterwards. As a

matter of fact, I cannot help thinking that old Dame Sparrow voiced the popular sentiment most nearly when she declared "that if the lawyer folk were to make her take her Alfred Davy she'd just 'ave to say as how she'd never seed such another in all her born days." As she was reputed to be upwards of a hundred years old (between ourselves she was only eighty-seven and three months when she died—which event happened some two years later) this assertion must be taken for what it is worth. The fact, however, remains that there was a fog, and that it made matters uncomfortable for everybody, always saving and excepting the school urchins, who made it an excuse that owing to its density they could not find their way to the village seat of learning.

Simon Brewster, Lord Carminster's butler, and, mark you, he was a butler of the old school, and therefore worthy of consideration, looked out of the first landing window of Carminster Park and carefully surveyed the scene. Having finished his scrutiny, he remarked to the pretty housemaid, who stood beside him, that accustomed as he was to fogs, "he couldn't call to mind such another of the like of this." Small wonder was it, therefore, that the handmaiden he addressed gazed at him in speechless admiration. Mr. Brewster's wife, it should be explained, enjoyed but poor health, and

Carminster Park, with his lordship always away, and a remunerative double salary, paid punctually, was at least a very desirable home.

"It's just such another day," continued Mr. Brewster (who by the way, and why should I deny it, knew a pretty girl when he saw one), "that his lordship's father broke his neck out on the Moor yonder. Brought 'ome he was on an 'urdle, and was buried by Parson Delcombe on the Monday following. Fine figure of a man too, carried his eighteen stone in his coffin like a lamb and was never sick, nor sorry as long as I knowed him. Oh, those days, I can see 'em as I stand 'ere. The 'ouse always full of company, not shut up like it is now, with the coverings all over the furniture, but every room full, and singing and dancing, hunting and shooting from morning till night. Those was days to remember, Turfell, and don't you mistake me."

Miss Turfell heaved a heavy, and what was doubtless intended to be a sympathetic sigh. She had never seen the present Lord Carminster, and was therefore compelled to draw her impressions from Mr. Brewster's description of him. If the truth must be confessed she regarded him somewhat in the light of a mamby-pamby sort of individual, who did not hunt but wrote books, who did not shoot but painted pictures, and, worse and more

damning crime than all, preferred life abroad to aristocratic stagnation in the home of his ancestors. Being privileged, she ventured to say as much. Mr. Brewster, who was still regarding the fog, heard her out with kindly complacency. The time had not arrived for the mid-morning beer and cheese, and, well, if the truth must be set down in cold drawn Stephens' ink, there could be no gainsaying the fact that she certainly was an uncommonly pretty girl. The fact remained, however, that he was an old family servant, and as such it behoved him to stand upon his dignity.

"Let them say what they will about his lordship," he remarked with admirable inconsistency, "he's every inch a lord. Let me just tell you, my girl, that if he was to look at you with those dark eyes of his you'd feel for all the world as if your 'ead was being bored through with gimlets. Tall and handsome he is, like his mother; and you must know that she was Lady Editha Vesculam, daughter of the Duke of Ambleworth, and a mighty fine and haughty lady at that. To see her walk from the carriage down this very 'all, just where we're standing now, would be to make you feel as if you'd never seen a grand lady in your life before; my good wife, poor soul, her cough's that troublesome this morning that she says, 'Please God, she won't be long with us,'" used to declare that it

wasn't walking at all, it was just floating through the h'air. And, mark this, when she give an order you didn't wait twice to obey it—you went off and did it right there and then."

Miss Turfell tossed her dainty head and declared that, after her experience as a parlourmaid in Exeter, she was not quite sure that the late Lady Carminster was the sort of mistress she would have cared to serve. What reply Mr. Brewster would have made to this mutinous speech it is impossible for me to say; his attention, however, was suddenly arrested by the appearance of a queer form, or figure, which was gradually evolving itself out of the mist. At first he inclined to the belief that it was a creation of his fancy, but then came to the conclusion that old Gillow at the Home Farm must have allowed one of the horses to escape, but when the figure came nearer his doubts were set at rest. The apparition resolved itself into the prosaic form of a telegraph boy, seated upon the back of a small pony. Now a telegraph boy at Carminster Park had been practically unknown for a matter of something like four years. Who could say what his appearance might betoken? Vague visions of a handsome legacy from a long-lost brother in Australia flashed before him. Miss Turfell was no less excited than he.

"Whatever can it mean?" she cried. "I do

hope it's not for me, for I never could abear the sight of a telegraft. My sister's husband used to say——” but Mr. Brewster did not wait to hear the opinions of the relative by marriage. He was half way down the great oak stairs before she had time to realize that he was gone. Resolved not to be outdone, however, she set off in pursuit.

Mr. Brewster tore open the envelope with trembling fingers. So slow was he in fact, that Miss Turfell felt as if she could almost have forgotten herself sufficiently to have shaken him. He read it through twice and then carefully replaced it in its envelope.

“ His lordship has returned to England,” he said at last, “ and will be here on Thursday.”

“ Oh my ! ” was all the pretty housemaid could reply. The announcement was so startling that it took her breath away. As she said afterwards, she was that flustered you could have knocked her down with a feather duster. The great, the mysterious, the all-powerful Lord Carminster coming home—why, it was more than even she, with her Exeter experiences, could realize at once. Never to her knowledge had she spoken to a real live lord face to face, much less waited on one. The very thought of it, she declared, put her all of a twitter.

Mr. Brewster went off to tell his wife the news,

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while Miss Turfell set to work to cross-examine the telegraph boy on the principle, I can only suppose, that having brought the message, he must, of course, know the business which was bringing his lordship back to his old English home. Needless to say the remainder of the day was spent in violent preparations. The brown holland covers were removed from the furniture, the stair rods in the main hall, which in all probability had not been burnished for months, were put in hand at once, while Mr. Brewster took careful stock of the wine cellar and doubtless wondered how he could account for the shrinkage which had taken place during the last few years. He was in every sense a careful man, and for that reason he had no idea of losing an excellent situation for the sake of a few dozen bottles of port—the loss of which would probably never be discovered. The climax, however, has still to be reached, and reached it was between eleven and twelve o'clock in the forenoon.

It was the telegraph boy who had brought the previous message who again presented himself. It was also Mr. Brewster who, corkscrew in hand, flew to meet him on the threshold. Once more the envelope was torn asunder, and once more the butler set to work to decipher its contents. Miss Turfell arrived just in time to assist him in his task.

"What is it now?" she asked with anxiety writ large upon her face. "I do hope and trust he's not coming to-day. I haven't got a cap, much less an apron, that's fit to be looked at."

Mr. Brewster turned and regarded her with an amazement that I am incapable of describing.

What were caps and aprons in the face of the situation with which he found himself confronted?

"His lordship's married," he gasped. "Her last ladyship's boudoir is to be re-papered within twenty-four hours, and I'm to engage a footman and three new maids."

The only sound that followed this momentous announcement was the ticking of the great hall clock.

Miss Turfell was the first to recover from her astonishment.

"Well, I never did," she observed, and then being a true woman continued, "I wonder what she's like?"

Mr. Brewster, however, had other things to think of. He had enjoyed a comfortable situation for many years, and now he began to see trouble ahead. His lordship was an easy-going master, who as long as he was not worried did not worry anyone else. With a mistress at the head of affairs it was impossible to predict what might happen.

The day was well advanced when his lordship and his wife made their appearance at the Park. For hours past the entire household had been in a state of trembling excitement. Even Mrs. Brewster, chronic invalid though she was, was up and about, working as if the happiness of her life depended upon it. Then the sound of wheels was heard upon the gravel of the drive and the carriage made its appearance.

Mr. Brewster was on the steps in readiness to open the door, the new footman stood at attention in the hall, ready to take his lordship's hat and coat, while the head gardener, who had not done his duty for upwards of three years, devoted himself to superintending the training of a creeper on the terrace wall, and touched his hat with the reverence which is apparently the peculiar property of the English confidential servant.

Lord Carminster alighted, and, when he had done so, gave his hand to his wife. He was a tall, slenderly built man, with a somewhat sallow complexion and dark eyes. That he was handsome there could be no doubt, but his good looks were somewhat discounted by a certain lack of expression which gave to his face a curious uniformity which at one time appeared to be cynical and at another to be deficient in character. He rarely smiled, but when he did everything was changed.

His eyes took a new light, in fact his face assumed an entirely new aspect.

"Welcome to Carminster," he said to his wife as they ascended the steps.

A close observer would have noticed that she turned and looked at him with an expression that was almost one of surprise upon her face. There could be no doubt about it. She was a decidedly pretty woman, of medium height, the possessor of a fine figure and wonderful eyes. As a matter of fact I don't think I have ever seen eyes like hers. They were of a dark brown, almond shaped and with long lashes that gave them the appearance of being always half closed. Her voice was low and musical and for some reason, which I am unable to explain, most people remembered it for a considerable time after they had heard it.

"Well, Brewster, I have no doubt you are surprised to see me," said Carminster, as he entered the hall.

"I'm very glad, my lord," replied the old man, but not with any great amount of enthusiasm. "We've been terrible quiet for a long time past."

"And I'm afraid you will be almost as quiet now," answered his master. "Lady Carminster, like myself, is fond of a quiet life."

As he spoke he turned and looked at his wife as if for corroboration of the statement he had just

given utterance to. She looked away, and then turned her face to him again. There was an expression upon it now that was difficult to account for. She appeared to be anxious. She was certainly paler.

"I wish your ladyship long life and happiness," said Mr. Brewster, with one of his best bows. "May your ladyship enjoy many peaceful days."

Her ladyship thanked him without any warmth in her voice and went down the hall, throwing her cloak on to a sixteenth century bench as she did so. To right and left of her were the famous Carminster portraits, each of which looked down at her as if wondering what the result of this curious arrival might mean. All things considered it was by no means a happy home coming. Even Miss Turfell realized this, for she declared in the servants' hall later that she did think a real lord would have driven up in his own carriage and pair, and not in a station fly. I am afraid she did not know Lord Carminster well enough to be able to appreciate his motives. He was by no means niggardly; in fact there are many stories of his generosity, which show him in a light few people would believe, but he detested any display of ostentation. A home coming such as most men would have liked: church bells pealing, triumphal arches, groups of cheering tenants and village

schoolchildren, would have worried him unspeakably. It was typical of him that one of his first acts after he had divested himself of his coat was to go to his study and to take from the bookcase an old volume of Italian poems. With deft fingers he turned the pages until he reached the sonnet he was in search of.

"Ah!" he observed, triumphantly, "I knew I was right. Lombardi of course meant the third Canto. The evidence is plain enough."

He replaced the book, and having done so, looked round the room that had seen so many generations of his race. It was a stately apartment, with deep mullioned windows which commanded a charming view across the Park towards the village beyond. It was a room to be proud of, a room that would be a veritable Paradise to a literary recluse. And yet, as he gazed across the Italian garden and Park, Carminster uttered a heavy sigh, as if he were uncertain as to whether he were pleased to see it again, or not.

Presently he replaced the book on its shelf and went towards the door. Before he could reach it, however, it was softly opened and his wife entered the now darkening room. She looked strangely beautiful in the half light. Indeed, she might have been one of the family portraits in the hall returned to life.

"What a beautiful old room," she said, looking wistfully at him as she spoke.

"It has been generally admired," he answered almost stiffly. Then, as if he felt he had been discourteous, he added, "won't you come to the window and see the view? It is scarcely fair to look at it in this light, but at least you can see the garden, which was my mother's pride. It is supposed to be one of the finest in England."

She accompanied him to the window and stood by his side looking out on the well cut lawns, the symmetrical beds, the statues and the fountains.

"It is very beautiful," she answered. "I do not wonder that you are proud of it."

This time there was little more than a suspicion of a sigh, but she noticed it and turned to him with wistful eyes. Her left hand went out as if to touch his own, but it did not reach it.

"It must be time to dress for dinner," he said, taking his watch from his pocket. "Can you find your way to your room? It's a rambling old house and a stranger is apt to get lost in it."

"I can find it quite well," was her reply, and this time her voice was as cold as his own. "And I hope it will not always consider me a stranger."

He opened the door for her and she passed out, after which he went back to the window and once more stood gazing across the Park. Whether he

saw anything of the view, however, it is impossible to say.

"Where will it end?" he muttered. "In Heaven's name where will it all end?"

As if in answer the evening breeze sighed round the corner of the house and rustled the dead leaves on the path outside. Certainly the most optimistic of men could not have called it a cheerful home coming. But what was the reason of it all?

Mr. Brewster, who had been idle in this respect for so many years, was in such a flutter concerning dinner that it required at least five glasses of the famous Carminster port to make him confident enough even to hand an entrée. With that marvellous perspicuity which is vouchsafed to servants he had already divined that all was not as it should be between his master and mistress, yet during the meal they kept up appearances wonderfully well. Carminster described the neighbourhood and some of its curious legends, told the tale of the famous Burden Wishing Well, which is known to be infallible in all cases of disappointed love; of the Barrow on the Down at the back of the Park, which on the twenty-third day of June is haunted by the spirit of an old Saxon warrior; of the Fairy Oak in the Park, which no mortal must approach on Midsummer Night unless he or she is prepared to die

within a month. He was an excellent *raconteur*, and knew how to make his points. Lady Carminter listened with divided attention. In all probability she quite understood why he was at such pains to amuse her. The feminine instinct is wonderfully intuitive.

"How did it go off?" asked Mrs. Brewster, who by some strange chance had discovered that it was possible for her to get up and cook. "Her ladyship is not 'alf bad looking."

"Look 'ere 'Arriet," said Mr. Brewster, upon whom the port was beginning to take effect, "that's not the way to talk about titled folk. Her ladyship may or may not be what we had a right to expect, but there's no getting away from the fact that she's his lordship's wife. Mind you, speaking between ourselves, I don't say as I think matters are quite as conjugal as they might be, but, as the saying goes, "those who live longest see most."

"At any rate, she's got an 'ussy of a lady's maid," observed his better half. "Comes down here and says to me, "Water's not hot."

"And what did you say," enquired her lord apprehensively. "I do 'ope you didn't give yourself away, 'Arriet?"

"I says to her, 'Perhaps you'll excuse me, Miss, but my kitchen's my kitchen, and I don't take no remarks from no one.' And with that she

flounced out of the room, banging the door behind her just as if she was a perfect lady."

Mr. Brewster groaned; he knew enough about women, and of his wife in particular, to feel sure that there was trouble looming ahead.

"You must be more circumscribed, 'Arriet,'" said Mr. Brewster, with the air of a man who has known all the follies of the world. Circumscription is the best virtue, especially for females, now there's a—"

"Yes, I know what you're going to say, so don't say it," replied the sharer of his joys and sorrows. The rest was silence.

If the truth must be told, and told of course it must be, the day following was even less satisfactory than its predecessor. Lord Carminster and his wife were to all intents and purposes as friendly as any married couple could hope to be; yet, to those who could read between the lines, there was a certain something which said conclusively that things were by no means progressing as smoothly as they might. There was a constraint that sat on everyone. Even the servants felt it.

After breakfast on the third day of their arrival Carminster and his wife explored the Park. They inspected the stables, the conservatories, the Home Farm. They exploited acres of Park land and at last they returned to the house for luncheon. For

my own part I doubt if they had talked for five minutes together.

"Telegram for you, m' lord," said the footman who opened the door to them.

Carminster took it from the salver without interest and opened it. As he read it his face clouded.

"Confound the man," he muttered. "He might at least have given us time to settle in. Order the dog-cart, Brewster, and see that one of the bachelors' rooms is prepared for a gentleman."

He then handed the message to his wife.

"How annoying," she said. "I did not think he would take advantage of our invitation so quickly."

"Oh! those sort of men always do. They practically spend their lives living on other people's hospitality. Now I am going to drive in to meet him."

He did so, and received him as he stepped from the train.

"Ah! Tremayne," he said, "so you have altered your plans and have come to see us after all. I have no doubt my wife will join with me in making you welcome."

"It's very good of you to allow me to intrude upon your home coming," said the other with a smile, "but as you gave me the chance of doing

so, I don't think in fairness you can blame me if I took you at your word."

They passed out of the station to the dog-cart and were presently bowling along the high road towards the Park. When they had entered the gates Tremayne looked about him.

"What a delightful place you have. When you told me about it in Vienna I did not for an instant imagine that it was anything like this. I am quite sure Lady Carminster must have been equally surprised."

What reply Lord Carminster was about to make to this speech I cannot say, for he had proceeded no further than "my wife" when the cart drew up at the front door and they entered the house. Lady Carminster was seated before the fire in the great square hall. She rose as they entered, and for once in her life at least, her manner was undecided. At last she came forward and held out her hand, but there was no smile of welcome upon her face.

Lord Carminster noticed her hesitation and glanced from one to the other. He saw Tremayne's thin lips curl in a smile and as he did so he ground his heel viciously into the soft Turkey carpet.

"You are too good to have me," said Tremayne, bowing over her hand in the foreign fashion.

"My husband's friends are always welcome,"

she answered, and then went back to her chair by the fire.

Once more Carminster ground his heel into the carpet, but this time, I regret to say, he swore under his breath.

CHAPTER II

IT was not for nothing that Gilbert Tremayne was nicknamed the "Stormy Petrel." It described him exactly; for wherever he went trouble assuredly followed. As a boy he was indirectly the means of getting a school-fellow expelled, two men were rusticated at the 'Varsity, practically on his account. He won twenty thousand francs from a man in Paris, and the poor wretch being unable to pay committed suicide. He was made an Attaché in Petersburg, but a scandal, which I need not mention here, forced him to leave the Russian capital at short notice, while the lady in question was advised that she had better not present herself at Court again. He returned to England and worked for the Bar. Probably he would have succeeded in his new vocation—for he possessed more than ordinary talent—had it not been for an obliging relative who died and left him the comfortable sum of thirty thousand pounds. After that he departed from England and spent his

time wandering about Europe. It was in Venice that he first met Carminster and his wife. They stayed at the same hotel. An intimacy sprang up between them and they soon became on the friendliest of friendly terms. The sequel you will hear later.

It was a bright sunny morning and the view from the breakfast room at Carminster Park was as delightful as any man could wish to see.

"They tell me the pheasants want thinning out," observed his lordship, when the servants had left the room. "If you care to shoot I think I can promise you fairly good sport."

"I shall be delighted," said Tremayne. But having been so long out of England I doubt very much if I should know a pheasant from a partridge. As for dropping one, well, I've shot a variety of things in my time —"

"Men?"

Lord Carminster as he asked the question glanced at his wife and observed that her face was as pale as death.

"Yes! On occasion, men! But I prefer birds!"

"I agree with you. But does it not strike you as rather an anomaly that while we can knock over an innocent creature that, far from harming us, flies at our approach, in this so called free land of ours we may not pull a trigger on a fellow

human who may have done us the gravest of all injuries? I have often thought it strange."

Tremayne gave his attention to the grouse upon his plate before he replied. Lady Carminster looked at an almost priceless Cloisonnée vase upon the carved oak mantel shelf as if she had never seen anything like it before.

"It seems to me we are getting morbid," remarked her husband with a laugh that did not seem quite natural. "And on such a glorious morning, too. You agree then that we shoot?"

"With the greatest pleasure in the world," replied Tremayne. "I shall be ready as soon as you are."

"Good! Then I'll give the necessary orders."

He rose and rang the bell, but not before he had taken note of the looks that were exchanged between the man and woman seated at the table.

At half-past ten o'clock, and punctual to the moment, the dog-cart with gun baskets, and luncheon hamper, was at the door. Then through the morning mist, which had not yet cleared, the two sportsmen drove away. Had one of them guessed what the end of that day's sport was to be I wonder if he would have lit his cigar with so much *sang-froid*. If he had it would not have been necessary for me to write this story.

Lady Carminster, who was not a sportswoman, at least in the usual acceptation of the word, stood upon the steps and watched them drive away.

"Won't you meet us and walk with us after lunch?" her husband had asked her before he got up into the cart. "We shall work the Three Mile Wood, and you can easily pick us up. Matthews will take care of that. He knows the country as well as I do."

"No! I don't think I will come," she replied. "I have a bad headache and I think I shall lie down for an hour or two. You see we have been moving about so much of late. However, you go away and enjoy yourselves. When I get up I shall find plenty to do. I am hardly settled down in my new home yet."

There was a little smile on Tremayne's face as she said this, and Carminster noticed it. Someone in Paris once said that Tremayne's smiles were like Dead Sea fruit—they were hard to get, and when you *did* get them they were so bitter you could not swallow them.

Darkness had fallen before the sound of the wheels of the dog-cart were again heard on the gravel of the drive. Lady Carminster was standing at the window of her boudoir waiting and watching. She saw the carriage pass the window,

and she also saw that it contained but two men, her husband and the groom. Tremayne was missing. Then the front door was opened and shut, and she heard her husband's footstep in the hall. A few minutes later he entered the room. In the lamp light his face looked strangely pale. She caught her breath as she saw how agitated he was.

"Where is Tremayne?" he asked. "Has he come back?"

She clutched at the back of a chair for support. Her worst fears were realized. What she had dreaded would happen had taken place.

"I have not seen him," she answered, and she could scarcely force herself to utter the words. "I thought he was with you. Why should he have come back alone?"

There was a momentary pause, then Carminster caught her by the wrist.

"Do you think you can fool me as you have fooled me before?" he said. "You know as well as I do that he has been here. He left me in one of the drives leading from the Long Walk and since then I have not seen him. He came back to you and you know it. Let me find him and I'll shoot him with as little compunction as I would a stoat. You may imagine that you have hoodwinked me, but you don't seem to be aware that I have eyes in my head, and that they watched you in Florence,

in Venice, and in Rome. I warned you against the man when you first met him. I told you his reputation; I bade you beware of him. And what heed did you pay to my warning? None at all! You went blindly on your wilful way."

Lady Carminster was about to say something, but she stopped. There was a long wait. Carminster rang the bell.

"Brewster," he said, "at what time did Mr. Tremayne come back?"

"He has not come back at all so far as I know, m' lord," replied the old man. He went away with you this morning, but if it's the last words I speak I haven't set eyes on him since."

"You're telling me the truth?"

"I served your father, m'lord, as a boy, and I've served you since. I don't know as how I've ever told him or you a lie. But this I do know and that is that Mr. Tremayne has not been in this 'ouse since he went out of it with you this morning. Ask yourself, m' lord, what reason should I have for saying so if he hadn't? With all due respect to you, m' lord, it don't stand to reason."

Mr. Brewster withdrew almost tearfully, and husband and wife were once more left alone together.

"Well?"

" Well ? "

" Have you nothing to say ? " asked Carminster, rising and crossing to the fireplace. " You invited Tremayne to stay with us. You told me that you were sorry that you had allowed him to become on such intimate terms with you in Florence, and now, well, what ? " he tossed the paper he had picked up away. " He shoots with me and he suddenly disappears. He was saying only a few minutes before that it was a pity you were not with us. What am I to suppose ? "

Lady Carminster walked towards the door. With her hand upon the handle she turned and looked at him. There was dignity in her bearing that should have convinced the greatest sceptic living. I have often thought when reconsidering the case that her reply was one of the cleverest retorts a woman could have made under such circumstances. It consisted of only four words, and they were : " I am your wife."

Carminster crossed the room and took her hand.

" By God, " he cried, " I believe you."

A moment later she had fallen in a dead faint upon the floor. Her husband picked her up and carried her up to her room, after which he sent for her maid to whose charge he consigned her. Having done so, he returned to his study, and sat down

before the fire. The red coals had a peculiar fascination for him. He seemed to see faces in them : the faces of men he had known in days gone by, and one or two pictures he would gladly have forgotten, had such a thing been possible. Tremayne's face seemed to be looking at him continually, the half closed eyes, the cynical smile, that curious twitching of the mouth which always meant mischief for someone, they were all there. And the countenance of the man himself as he sat looking into the fire was not the least remarkable. The clear cut profile, the lofty brow, the sensitive mouth, were as indicative of his nature as if it had been written upon vellum by an up-to-date smart set character reader.

" If only I knew," said Carminster, as he poked the fire with savage energy. " The deuce of it is, however, I don't ! I cannot believe she is lying to me, yet why was she so anxious to have him here, and why did she look so pale when the shooting episode turned up this morning ? Heaven knows I love her as truly as man ever loved woman, and to think that it should be in the power of that cur to ruin our happiness ? "

Dinner time arrived and still there was no sign of Tremayne. As a rule he was the most punctual of men, particularly where ladies were concerned.

Half-an-hour went by and still he did not put in an appearance. His host and hostess, for Lady Carminster had recovered sufficiently to come down, waited for him in the drawing room, but still he did not appear. They watched the hands of the clock with an anxiety which everyone can understand who has anxiously expected an overdue guest. Mr. Brewster entered the room, put some coal upon the fire, glanced round to see that everything was in order and then returned to the kitchen to report that "things was far from being what they might be." The cook most cordially agreed with him. Her dinner was spoiling, and, being an artist in the culinary line, she regarded the visitor's non-appearance as a slight to herself.

At last, tired of waiting, Carminster and his wife sat down to their meal. Needless to say there was not a superfluity of conversation. Carminster once more expressed his astonishment that Tremayne had not arrived. Lady Carminster, without raising her eyes from her plate, replied to the effect that she thought it very extraordinary; the clock ticked solemnly upon the mantelpiece; the men-servants moved quietly round the table; that was all.

After dinner they returned to the drawing room. The fire was burning cheerily and the shaded lamps shed a mellow light upon the handsome room. I doubt very much, however, if either of

the pair who occupied it had any thought for its beauty. Being a true Englishman, Carminster planted himself on the hearth-rug, while his wife made a pretence of reading; neither succeeded in their assumed indifference.

The man was the first to speak.

"It's the most extraordinary thing of its kind I ever heard of," he said. "You ask a man to your house and, without rhyme or reason, he clears out. For the life of me I cannot make head or tail of it. I've sent word to the keepers to search the Three Mile, in case any accident should have happened to him. But I don't think there is much fear of that."

As he said this he discovered a look on his wife's face that revived all his old doubts and fears. Her face was as white as snow, and there was an expression in her eyes that was like that of a frightened roe. He was about to say something, but he stopped as the butler entered the room.

"If you please, m' lord," he said, "the keepers have searched the Wood and the fields all round it and they can't find a trace of the gentleman."

"Tell Matthews to send a groom to the railway station at once," replied his lordship. "Let it be one of the men who can describe Mr. Tremayne. He must find out whether he went up

to town. Let him be told also that he is not to waste any time."

Brewster went off upon his errand and once more husband and wife were alone together. He took up a book and sat down to read. She was apparently absorbed in a magazine; he noticed, however, that she did not turn a page. It was plain to the meanest intelligence that she was as anxious as he, but what was the reason of it all? Was she, through all this, keeping something back from him? Did she know, while she pretended to him that she did not, the whereabouts of the missing man? The very thought of such a thing set his blood afire. That the woman he loved, the woman upon whom he had bestowed his name, the woman to whom he had given affluence in exchange for genteel poverty, could betray him, was incredible. And yet, what was he to believe? It seemed to him that the facts spoke for themselves. I don't think until that moment he really knew how fondly he loved her. On his side at least it had been a case of love at first sight. She was the daughter of an old English Colonel of dissipated habits whom he had met in Dieppe, and very naturally the father was only too pleased to marry his child to a rich Peer. For a time their happiness had been complete, then Tremayne appeared upon the

scene, and from that moment all went wrong. What it was about him that made him so fascinating to women no one can tell, but that he did exercise an influence over them cannot be denied. He was not particularly handsome, in fact being only a mere man myself I never thought him handsome at all, yet with very few exceptions every woman who came in contact with him became susceptible to his influence.

Shortly before ten o'clock the groom returned from the station to report that no one in way resembling Tremayne had been seen there; the station-master was perfectly sure of it.

"The mystery appears to be deepening with every hour," said Lord Carminster. "I cannot understand it. I don't want to put the matter in the hands of the police for obvious reasons, but if he does not soon make his appearance I shall be compelled to do so. What is the matter with you, Alice?"

Lady Carminster had suddenly burst into tears.

"Nothing, nothing," she answered. "I am nervous, that is all. I never dreamt we should have such trouble as this."

"It's the natural result of having made the acquaintance of a man like Tremayne," replied her husband. "I always thought myself a judge of

character, and in this instance it appears I was not mistaken. However, that has nothing to do with the matter at issue. The man is missing, and as he is, or was, my guest, he must be found, and the sooner the better for all parties concerned. You had better go to bed, dear. I shall stay up until midnight and then give him until breakfast time to put in an appearance. If he does not do so then I shall send into Kelston for the Inspector and let him do what he can to find him."

Lady Carminster made no reply to this remark. It was significant, however, that the book she had taken up fell from her hands into her lap and she did not attempt to pick it up again.

"As I said just now, go to bed, my dear," remarked her husband. "You're tired out."

"And you?"

"Oh, don't worry about me. I shall be all right."

Lady Carminster crossed the room and kissed him. It was the kiss of a woman who loved, but of one who was in deadly fear and who was endeavouring to conceal the fact. Then she left the room and Carminster went to his study and settled himself down before the fire with a book. Brewster looked in upon him about eleven o'clock and found him pacing the room, his hands behind his

back and an expression of intense anxiety upon his face.

"Is there anything I can get for you, m' lord?" asked the old man.

"No, nothing at all, thank you, Brewster," his master replied. "I shall remain up until midnight and if by that time Mr. Tremayne has not returned, you had better send a groom first thing in the morning into Kelston to ask Inspector Bardsley to come out and see me."

"Very good, m' lord," answered Brewster and withdrew.

When midnight arrived there was still no sign of the missing man. Once more he rang the bell.

"I shall not wait any longer," he said. "It is evident that we shall not see him to-night. Send Parker up to me and see that one of the men go to the Police Inspector to-morrow morning. I should like to see him as early as possible."

It would not be the truth to say that Carminster slept well that night. As a matter of fact he scarcely slept at all. When at last he *did* drop off his dreams were so terrible that he had far better have remained awake. He talked and talked, and with every word he said his wife appeared to grow more and more afraid.

"I should have killed him at once," he muttered

once. "Yes, I should have killed him at once. It would have been safer."

When it was scarcely light he rose and went to his dressing room, a quarter of an hour later he had saddled a horse himself and was riding across the Park. He did not know that his wife, whom he believed to be asleep, was in reality watching him between the curtains of her bedroom. What her thoughts were at that moment who can say? What did she know, or worse still, what did she suspect?

After leaving the Park he rode at a fast pace towards the Three Mile Wood. It was a cold and misty morning, the rime was upon the hedgerows, and the road was as hard as iron. It was impossible to see more than a dozen yards ahead. Once a rabbit crossed the road and scuttled into the bushes on the other side as if he were afraid his last moment had come. Carminster, however, paid no attention to such minor matters, his brain was too fully occupied with more important matters. Just where the hill begins to descend to Barnscombe he turned sharply to the left and cantered across the grass towards an old-fashioned farm house. The farmer who occupied it was his oldest tenant and had been a tenant of his father before him.

Consigning his horse to the care of a man he

espied crossing the yard, he approached the front door to be received on the threshold by the farmer himself. There was a look on the old man's face that told him how surprised he was by such an early visit. Being a prudent man he waited to hear the reason of it.

"I suppose, Williams, you are wondering what has brought me here at such an early hour," he said. "The fact of the matter is I'm in trouble about a gentleman who is my guest."

"Mr. Tremayne, my lord?"

"Yes, Mr. Tremayne. How did you know that?"

"Giles was here enquiring after him last night, my lord."

"Well, he was shooting with me yesterday in the Three Mile and quite suddenly he went away. I sat up for him until midnight hoping that he would return, but he has not put in an appearance. Needless to say I am very anxious about him. The mystery is one that neither her ladyship nor I can solve. The keepers have been looking for him but they cannot find him. I am communicating with the police this morning, but I am not very hopeful of their helping me much."

"They tell me you last saw him in the Long Walk?"

"That is so, and from that moment to this I have not set eyes upon him. I have no idea of what has become of him, but I fancy you can understand my anxiety. I thought I would come out and see you, hoping you might have heard something of him."

"I have not, my lord. But I'll do anything that's possible to help you to find him. If your lordship will excuse me for a few moments I'll have a saddle put on the cob and then we might take a ride round."

Five minutes or so later the two men were following a bridle path across the fields in the direction of the plantation where his lordship had last seen the missing man and which was known in the district as the Three Mile Wood. It was intersected by drives and there was a keeper's cottage at the further end. They rode there first and the keeper's wife, hearing the horses, came running out and bobbed a curtsey to my lord.

"Good morning, Mrs. Giles," said the latter.
"Is your husband at home?"

"No, m' lord, he went out as soon as he'd had his breakfast," the woman replied. "He said he was going to take another look round for the gentleman who was shooting with your lordship yesterday. The last I saw of him was going down the main drive."

"Thank you, Mrs. Giles," replied Carminster.
"We must see if we can find him."

They bade the woman "Good morning," and then commenced their quest. But though they rode up one drive and down another they could discover no trace of either the keeper or Tremayne. At length they reached the place where Carminster had last seen his guest.

"He was standing here," he observed to his companion, "and I was just round the angle of the path. Giles had gone back to his cottage to say that we would take our lunch there. Suddenly a pheasant rose and flew over my head, or I should say a little to the left. I gave a half turn and fired. When I looked round again Mr. Tremayne had disappeared. For a few moments I paid no attention to his absence, supposing that he had gone to search for a lost bird. I must have waited for fully five minutes before I called him by name. There was no answer. I thereupon set off in search of him, but not a sign of him could I discover. What has become of him I cannot for the life of me understand. The enigma is an inexplicable one."

"You didn't happen to hear any shot, my lord?" enquired the farmer.

"If I had I should have known that he was still in the Wood," the other answered. "But I heard nothing."

"Well, it does certainly seem strange."

Just at that moment Giles, the keeper, made his appearance in the drive with a white and scared face.

"Oh! m' lord, heaven be thanked it's you!"

Both men instantly divined what had happened.

"You have found him?" said his master.

"God help me, I have," was the reply.

"Where?"

"Behind the stack of hurdles at the edge of the Wood."

"Then let us go there!"

CHAPTER III

WITHOUT a word the trio made their way towards the edge of the Wood where the stack of hurdles referred to by Giles, the keeper, was built up in a field.

"Here it is, m' lord," said the man. "But I think it my duty to warn your lordship that it's by no manner of means a pleasant sight."

"We must not think of that," Carminster replied, and dismounted from his horse and approached a hurdle which had been taken from the stack and laid upon something on the ground. "Did you put the hurdle there?" he enquired.

"No, m' lord," the man answered. "It was just as you see it now when I came round this way half-an-hour ago. I saw it lying there and, thinking that I might trip over it in the dark when I came my rounds, I lifted it up and discovered the poor gentleman's body underneath."

"Then lift it up now!"

Giles did as he was ordered and then a terrible sight was exposed to view. Stretched upon the

ground upon his back, one arm doubled underneath, and the head battered in and covered with blood, was the man for whom they had been searching. It was evident that he had been dead for many hours. Carminster knelt beside him to convince himself of the fact. That it was a case of murder there could be no doubt. It could not have been anything else. It was also evident that robbery had not been the motive of the crime—since his watch and chain had not been taken, nor had a valuable diamond ring which he wore upon the little finger of his left hand.

"Lord have mercy upon us," cried the old farmer, with a shudder of horror. "This is a terrible business, to be sure!"

"You may well say that," answered his lordship. "The next thing to be done is to find out who committed the crime. Were there any gypsies about here yesterday, Giles, or did you notice any suspicious character?"

"Not one, m' lord. They give me a wide berth. Besides if they had done it they would have robbed him. So far as I can see nothing has been taken. That ring must be worth a matter of fifty pounds, I suppose?"

"Quite that," answered Carminster. "No, the robbery theory must be discarded. What has become of his gun?"

"Well, I be a duffer never to have thought of that," returned the keeper.

He began to search the long grass about the stack for the weapon. Carminster, having asked the farmer to hold his horse, joined in the hunt, but for a long time they were unsuccessful. Then entering the Wood they continued the search. It was not until some ten minutes later that a cry from the keeper proclaimed the fact that it had been found. It was lying in a bush in a position that suggested it had been hastily thrown down. Giles was about to pick it up, but his master stopped him.

"Don't touch anything," he said, "until the police have arrived and made their inspection. They must be communicated with at once. Replace the hurdle on the body just as you found it and do not leave the spot until the Inspector and his men arrive."

"Very good, m' lord," Giles returned, but with no expression of pleasure upon his face.

Carminster and the farmer then rode away, the former to dispatch a message to the police and the latter to return to his own abode, where he told his story to his gaping wife and daughters who listened with a relish that a certain class of people always find in the details of a horrible crime. As for Carminster, his brain was full of conflicting thoughts as he rode rapidly down the road

that led to the village and through it to Kelston. As good luck would have it the Inspector was at the Police Station when he arrived, and received him with every sign of respect. He had heard a great deal of the famous Lord Carminster, but as he had been appointed during the other's absence from England, this was the first time that he had seen him. When he learned the reason which had brought him, his feelings were made up of horror at the dastardly nature of the deed and a sense of good fortune that it should have happened in his district. That a friend of a Peer should have been brutally murdered would make a stir throughout England, and his own name would figure importantly in the conduct of the case.

"I will drive out at once, m' lord," he said, "and when I have made a note of all the particulars and questioned your gamekeeper I will have the body conveyed to the village inn where it must lie until the inquest. I am afraid the Coroner will deem it necessary to subpoena your lordship," he added apologetically.

"I am quite prepared to give evidence," the other replied. "The gentleman was my guest and no stone must be left unturned to bring his murderer to justice. Should you desire to ask me

any further questions I shall be at home all day and will be very glad to answer them.

"I am obliged to your lordship," the officer returned. "I trust it will not be long before we have the murderer safely under lock and key. I don't know that such a crime as this has ever been heard of in the county before."

Carminster bade him "Good morning" and then went out into the street to where his horse was being held by a constable. He mounted and rode slowly home, pondering as he went over the various aspects of the case. Now that the man was dead he did not feel so much animosity against him; he remembered him rather as a witty though somewhat cynical companion, who could be all things to all men and who, when he laid himself out to try to please, could exercise a charm the like of which is possessed by few. But what had taken him away so mysteriously? What had been his reason for leaving the Wood without a word of farewell to his host? Had he intended returning to the Park in order to meet the other's wife? Carminster felt the old rage surge up within him as the thought occurred to him.

At last he reached home and, when he had given up his horse, strode into the house. Brewster met him in the hall.

"Where is your mistress?" he asked of the old man.

"In her boudoir, m' lord," the other returned, not without some misgivings as he noticed the ominous scowl upon his master's face.

The latter proceeded to the room in question where he found his wife, who had heard his horse's step upon the drive outside, anxiously awaiting his coming.

"Have you heard any news of him?" she asked, picking at the lace handkerchief she held as she spoke. "But I can see in your face that you have."

"Yes, I have," he answered. "The man is dead! He will work no more mischief."

"Dead!" she cried in horror, gazing at him with terrified eyes. "Oh! it cannot be true. I cannot believe it."

"And yet I assure you it is a fact," retorted her husband. "He was brutally murdered on the fringe of the Three Mile Wood."

She uttered a hoarse cry and seized him by the arm.

"Who did it?" she asked in a voice that he scarcely recognized, so charged with terror was it.

"That is exactly what the police are going to find out," he answered. "It is to be hoped that they will catch him before very long."

"But may it not be a case of suicide? May he not have killed himself?"

"Men don't batter their own heads in from behind when they want to kill themselves, besides he had his gun with him. He was hit on the head from behind, but that is enough of the matter for the present. We shall probably know more later. The police are coming to see me here when they have conveyed the body to the place where the inquest will be held."

She sank down in a chair and covered her face with her hands. She was trembling like a leaf and seemed on the verge of becoming hysterical. She sobbed convulsively while her husband stood at the window looking out on the terrace.

"For a dutiful wife you seem vastly concerned about him," he said without turning his head.

She allowed the gibe to pass unheeded. Indeed I doubt very much whether she noticed it at all. All she could mutter between her sobs was, "It is too terrible—it is too terrible."

Fearing that he might forget himself altogether and say something that he would never be able to recall, he left the room and went to his own study. He tried to interest himself in a scientific work which was attracting a considerable amount of attention at the time. His effort, however, was in vain. The lines became blurred and swam

before his eyes. Exert his will as he would he could not manage to concentrate his attention. At last, in despair, he threw the book down upon the table and sat gazing into the fire as he had done when waiting for his guest on the previous evening. In his mind's eye he saw continually that ghastly figure under the hurdle and even seemed to hear the rustle of the wind in the dead leaves as they searched for the gun.

"If only I could be certain," he muttered, as he had done so often before. "The doubt will haunt me to my grave. Is it only because he was our guest and a friend that the news of his death has such an extraordinary effect upon her, or?" he stopped without mentioning the alternative, but the frown did not leave his face. He remembered Paris and Rome, and a hundred and one little episodes which at the time did not appear important now swelled to gigantic proportions.

He was still brooding over the subject when Brewster entered the room to announce the Inspector of Police. He made his appearance with an air of no small importance, as if he were already convinced that, far from being a commonplace country Inspector, he had blossomed out as a celebrity.

"Come in, Inspector," said his lordship, "and take a chair."

The other did so, seating himself in a constrained position, as if he were overwhelmed by the sumptuousness of the apartment.

"Now what have you to tell me? Have you succeeded in obtaining any clues?"

"We have found the weapon with which the deed was committed. It was a long heavy stake and had been pulled from one of the hurdles, and traces of blood and hair are still to be seen upon it. Perhaps your lordship would like to examine it for yourself. I have it in my cart outside."

The other declined the honour on the plea that he had no taste for such gruesome relics. The Inspector appeared a trifle disappointed at this lack of appreciation, but of course did not say so.

"You found the gun of course, and doubtless you noted the fact that, from the way in which it had fallen into the bush, it had evidently been dropped without premeditation."

"I have a note of the circumstance in my pocket book," the Inspector replied with respectful dignity. His professional reputation was at stake and he did not feel disposed to accept suggestions from any man, even though he happened to be a real live Peer. Carminster noticed this and a cynical smile flitted across his face.

"Have you any theory to account for the crime?" he asked.

" Well, m' lord, I thought it out on the way back and this is the conclusion I have come to. It wasn't robbery, for his ring was on his finger, and a very valuable ring it is too ; his watch and chain had not been taken, while in the breast pocket of his shooting coat there was a leather case containing ten five pound notes. There was also three pound ten in gold and silver in his trouser pocket. No, m' lord, if you want to know what my opinion is, I believe he was murdered by someone who had a grudge against him, someone to whom he had done an injury and whose motive was revenge, not robbery. Whoever did it must have stolen up behind him and hit him on the head before he could turn round. The fact that there was no sign of any struggle appeared to me to point to that. The gentleman, from his build, must have been a powerful man and, if he had been given the chance, would most certainly have shown fight, in addition to which we must remember that he was armed."

Carminster drummed on the arm of his chair with the fingers of his right hand before he replied.

" Your theory is an ingenious one and coincides with my own," he said. " But who can have entertained such a grudge against him and have followed him out to the Wood in question ? For my part I saw no one in the plantation at all, save my friend and Giles, the keeper. The latter also

declares that there was no one near the hurdle stack when he passed it on his way to his cottage with the message I had given him to take to his wife concerning our luncheon."

"But it is evident, m' lord," objected the Inspector, "that someone was there, otherwise the murder could not have taken place. It's a big mystery, and will cause a great sensation when the public come to hear of it. I suppose, m' lord, you don't happen to know of anyone in England or on the Continent who had a grudge against him and would be likely to attempt his life?"

"I certainly do not," Carminster answered. "But then I knew very few of his acquaintances. He was merely a person of whom we saw a good deal when abroad and whom we invited to pay us a visit should he ever be in this neighbourhood. I believe there were certain stories connected with his name, but as I do not know the details and cannot vouch for their truth I prefer not to speak of them. That they would have anything to do with his murder, provided they were true, I should consider exceedingly improbable. Inquiries at the railway station might possibly acquaint you of the fact as to whether any stranger, particular any foreigner, had arrived in the place. There are not so many here that one would fail to attract attention."

"I will make inquiries there myself," returned

the other. "And now I do not think I need detain your lordship any longer. I expect the inquest will take place to-morrow at the Blue Bear Inn. However, a notification will be sent you in due course. I have the honour to wish your lordship good morning."

"Good morning, Mr. Inspector, and many thanks to you for calling."

The Inspector thereupon left the room and Carmminster returned to his seat by the fire.

"What a fool I was ever to let him come into the house," he muttered to the cigarette he had just lighted, "and what a still greater fool I was in the first place to allow Alice to become acquainted with him, when I knew his reputation. I have only myself to thank for the mess I am in. Heaven alone knows where it will all end, which while being a very devout remark can hardly be considered consolatory under such peculiar circumstances."

At that moment the gong sounded for lunch and he rose from his chair with a heavy sigh, tossed his cigarette into the fire and prepared to leave the room.

"Nero, they ask us to believe, fiddled when Rome was burning," he said to himself as he passed into the hall. "We, in this enlightened age, go one better, and sit down to a prosaic lunch

within a few hours of making the discovery that our friend and guest has been murdered. We're queer folk at the best of times, but never more so than at such a time as this."

Somewhat to his surprise he found his wife awaiting him in the dining room. She still looked very pale, but it was evident that she intended to at least appear before the servants to be on the best of terms with her husband. As was only natural under such distressing circumstances their conversation flagged sadly at times; but no one, who was not in the secret, would have guessed the thoughts that filled the brains of each to the exclusion of aught else. At last the meal came to an end and they left the room together.

"Ronald," said his wife, when they were alone together in the beautiful wainscotted hall with its superb collection of armour and family portraits, "I should like to speak to you for a moment if you would not mind coming into my boudoir."

He bowed and followed her without a word into the room in question. His manner towards her was studiously polite, but it was as cold as an iceberg. How different to the day when he had shown her the house on their first home coming. On reaching the room he carefully closed the door behind him and then waited for her to speak.

Upwards of a couple of minutes elapsed before she did so. It was plain that she had worked herself up to a pitch of intense excitement and that it was quite within the bounds of possibility that she would have a repetition of the attack of hysteria which had followed their quarrel on the previous evening. This, for more reasons than one, he had no desire should happen. It would then be impossible to predict what she might do or say. One incautious speech let fall before a servant and their mutual happiness, if they were destined ever to know such a state of things again, would be irretrievably ruined.

"Well, Alice," he said at last, "you asked me to come in here because you had something to say to me. What is it?"

"I know you will be angry with me for asking the question," she replied without looking at him, "but I believe if I do not do so I shall go mad. This torture is more than I can bear. I am trying my best to be brave, but—but—"

Her abject misery would have touched a heart of stone, but from any outward sign he gave of being moved by it her husband might not have heard it. The men of his race had never been over gentle with women, and on this occasion it did not look as if he were destined to prove an exception to the rule. And yet there had been a

time when nothing was good enough for her, when he could not bear her out of his sight, when every look and every word spoke of his seemingly unperishable love.

" You have not yet told me what it is you want to ask me," he repeated. " Please be quick as I have an appointment at the Home Farm in a quarter of an hour and I don't want to keep Bertram waiting."

" I beg of you to tell me—to tell me—" she began again, " whether you and Mr. Tremayne had a quarrel yesterday when you were out shooting. Don't think I am asking the question with any idle motive. I pledge you my word of honour I am not."

" To put it in another way round," he returned, looking at her in amazement as he did so, " you want to know whether I was so jealous of the fellow that I murdered him. I thank you, Lady Carminster, for your good opinion of me. Well, let me tell you once and for all that I decline to answer the question in any shape or form save to say this, that it would doubtless have served him right had I done so, but that is beside the matter so we need not go into it. Were we to indulge in mutual recriminations I have no doubt I could say some things which would be as unpleasant for you to hear as they would be for me to utter."

"What do you mean?" she cried, her hands clenched and her whole nature suddenly changing. "I demand to be told what you mean by that speech. If you are a gentleman you will tell me."

"Since you wish to hear it I will be as fair to you as you have been to me," he answered, drawing a step or two closer to her. "Here is a question for you. Why did Tremayne leave the Wood in that mysterious fashion without a word of warning to me? Did he intend coming back here?"

"You mean did he intend coming back to me, or to put it coarsely had I an assignation with him? Lord Carminster, you asked me to marry you. You knew that we were poor, that I had never known anything better than a life of genteel poverty; but at the same time you must have believed me to be a lady and at least an honourable woman or you surely would not have given me your name. Now that you have brought this vile accusation against me what am I to think? It is evident that I am not worthy to be your wife."

"I have brought no accusation against you," her husband replied. "I have simply asked you a question as you put one to me. Is there not a vulgar saying to the effect that what is sauce for the goose is also sauce for the gander. If this

logic be correct I cannot see that you have any right to complain."

She swept by him with an air of disdain that would not have discredited a tragedy queen.

"We seem to be going from bad to worse," said her husband when he found himself alone. "Well, it does no good to worry about it. What must be must be. It's a question of Kismet and I suppose we must face the inevitable."

He took his hat and stick and set off across the Park for the Home Farm, where he had arranged a conference with his estate agent. I am afraid, however, that he did not bestow as much attention as he would at any other time upon the suggestions made to him by that worthy individual. The interview, however, lasted longer than he had expected it would do. In fact more than an hour elapsed before they parted, the agent feeling rather sore that his work during his employer's absence did not appear to be appreciated at the same value that he placed upon it, and Carminster bored to death by such trivialities as new linhays, the fencing of the southern end of the Park, and the contumacy of a certain tenant on the all important question, to the man of business, of payment of his rent.

On leaving the farm Carminster strolled first down to the lake, and then slowly back to the

house. He let himself in by a side door and went direct to his study. All the way home he had been reproaching himself for the speech he had made to his wife and, after a hard fight with his pride, he had at length decided to tell her that he was sorry for it. He rang the bell and Brewster answered it, looking more nervous than his master had ever seen him before.

"Where is her ladyship—in the drawing room or in her boudoir?"

The old man tried to speak but his voice failed him.

"What on earth is the matter with you, man?" asked Carminster angrily. "Don't you feel well?"

"Perfectly well, m' lord," the other replied. "But I was a bit took aback, because I thought your lordship knew that her ladyship went away in the brougham with her luggage about an hour ago."

"Lady Carminster went away an hour ago?" cried his master incredulously. "What do you mean? Have you gone mad?"

"No, m' lord, but just after you'd gone out, her ladyship rang for her maid and ordered her trunks to be packed and the station brougham brought round. You'll excuse me, m' lord, but there's a letter for you upon the hall table."

" Bring it to me ! "

The letter duly arrived and Carminster tore it open. It was from his wife.

" You can go ! "

Mr. Brewster accordingly withdrew and went down the hall shaking his venerable head.

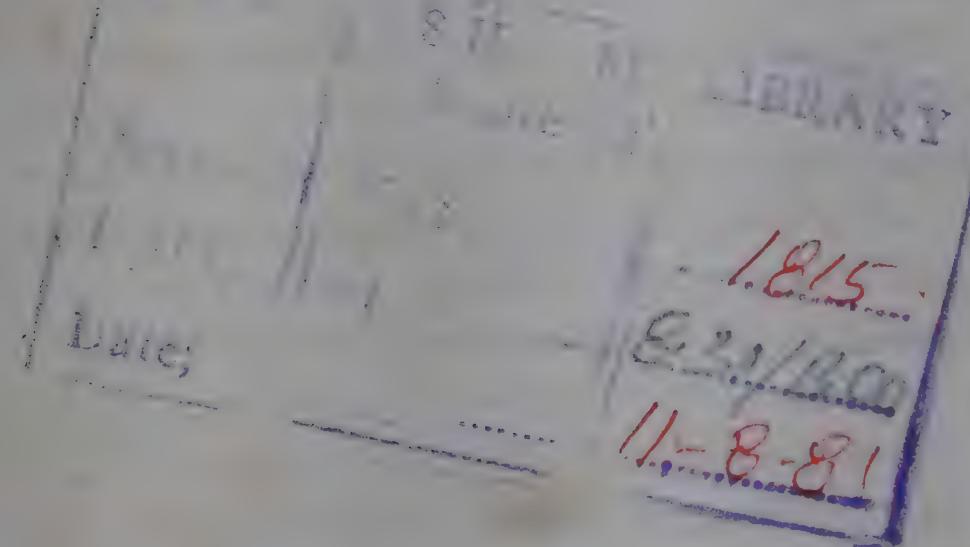
" DEAR RONALD, (the letter ran) :

" After what you said to me to-day, it is impossible that I can remain any longer with you. Try to forget that we ever met. You will be happier while I shall be—

" Your broken-hearted wife,

RBA

" ALICE."



CHAPTER IV

FOR some minutes after he had read the letter which his wife had left for him, Carminster stood gazing at it as if he hoped to derive some further information concerning the inexplicable occurrence if only from the texture of the paper. It seemed to him impossible that the woman he had loved so fondly could have found it in her heart to run away from him at such a juncture and on account of what was after all a mere outburst of jealousy. He read the note again and, as he did so, its real significance was borne in upon him with crushing effect. To begin with, she had not said where she was going and the fact that she had not taken her maid with her struck him as ominous to the last degree. The situation was a desperate one in every respect, both for him and for her. There would be hundreds of people who would recall the intimacy which existed between his wife and the murdered man. It was even possible that her presence might be required at the inquest to be held on the following day. What construction,

therefore, would inevitably be placed on her flight? If only for her sake he knew he must endeavour to discover her whereabouts and to induce her to return to him before scandal had an opportunity of making free with her name. But how was he to do it? He thrust the letter into the fire lest by any chance it might fall into other hands, and then gave the bell such a rousing peal that to this day Mr. Brewster declares it gives him a cold shiver to think of it.

"Order a horse to be saddled for me without a moment's delay. I don't know what time I shall be back to dinner."

Then he hastened upstairs to his wife's room. So far as he could see everything there was as usual. Once more he rang the bell and bade the man who answered it send her ladyship's maid to him. Doubtless the matter by this time had been freely discussed in the servants' hall and the girl came up in fear and trembling.

"What train did your mistress wish to catch?" he asked.

"I do not know, m' lord. She did not tell me. She only told me to pack her trunks and to see that the men put them on the carriage. I asked her if I was to go with her, but she said no. If you please, m' lord, her jewel case is in the safe and I was to give you the key."

As she said this she produced the key in question and handed it to him. He took it without a word and slipped it into his waistcoat pocket. It is doubtful whether she could have struck him a crueler blow than this.

"That will do," he said turning to the maid.
"You can go downstairs again."

As there was nothing more to be learnt at the house he mounted his horse and, following the advice he had that morning given the Inspector of Police he, in his turn, set off to make enquiries at Kelston Railway Station. He felt that it would be necessary for him to use great diplomacy, for he had no desire to set idle tongues wagging, and he had the best of reasons for knowing the depth of interest taken by humble folk in the doings of the great. As he rode down the main street of the little town he met his own carriage returning and stopped it.

"What train did her ladyship catch?" he asked of the footman.

"The 4.10 up, m' lord," the man replied.
"We were only just in time."

This was some information gained at least, and Carminster rode on to the station a little, but not very much, relieved. On his arrival there he purchased a paper at the bookstall as if by way of an excuse and then stood talking to the station-master,

who had known him from his youth up. Then as if it were a matter of mere curiosity he said, "By the way, Saunders, can you tell me if Lady Carminster booked right through to the terminus as I advised her? She went up by the 4.10."

"I can easily find out," the man replied. "We had only three passengers from here."

He went off to make enquiries at the ticket office and also from the porter who had labelled the luggage. Presently he returned.

"Right through to the terminus, m' lord," he said. "It's one of our best trains, is the 4.10, and will get her ladyship up just in nice time for dinner."

"What is your next?"

"We haven't another until six o'clock, and that's a slow one."

"Never mind, that will suit me admirably. I have been occupied nearly all day over this terrible murder case of which you have no doubt heard, and only returned home after seeing to certain things on the estate in time to miss my wife. I am very much obliged to you for your trouble."

"I am honoured to have been of use to you, m' lord."

Carminster left the station and made his way to the principal inn of the place, where he gave his horse to an ostler to hold while he went inside.

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For the good of the house he called for a brandy and soda and then borrowed a sheet of note paper and an envelope. On the former he wrote to his valet bidding him pack up sufficient things to carry him through the night and have them sent in in a dog-cart without a moment's delay, as he wished to catch the six o'clock train to London. Then having arranged matters with the buxom landlady, he bade the ostler mount his horse and ride out with all dispatch to the Park.

"You will have to make him put his best foot foremost," he said, "or I shan't get my bag in time to catch the next London train. See that they do not delay, and you can come back in the dog-cart with the groom. Here is five shillings for your trouble."

The man mounted and rode off at a pace that was quite in keeping with his instructions, and then Carminster went to the telegraph office. Thence he dispatched a message to Colonel Daubeny, his wife's father, at Asnieres. The message ran as follows:—

"Have you received a telegram from Alice? Please wire me Palladium Club. Very anxious.
"CARMINSTER."

That done he proceeded to the Police Station where he had an interview with the Inspector.

"Have you discovered anything fresh?" he asked that official.

"Nothing at all," the other replied. "We have made enquiries in every direction, the railway station included, but can hear of no one, that is to say no stranger, either English or foreign, who would be in the least likely to commit such a dastardly crime. This afternoon a gypsy was arrested on suspicion, but he was easily able to prove to our satisfaction that he had had no hand in it. We have not of course had much time, but so far it remains as great a mystery as ever."

"And the inquest? I have received no subpoena yet. I am going up to town by the six o'clock train, but I shall be down by mid-day to-morrow. That will give me ample time to be present, should my evidence be required."

"I am afraid you will be put to that trouble, for the Coroner will probably consider you the most important witness. You see, next to the criminal, you are the last person who saw the murdered man alive."

"In that case I am at the Coroner's service, and will make a point of being present."

He bade the Inspector "Good day," and went for a walk through the town, the greater portion of which was his own property. When he unbent

no one could do it more graciously than Carminster. He nodded pleasantly to one, stopped for a moment's chat with another, and generally gave everyone with whom he came in contact the idea that he was exactly what a true nobleman should be. Yet with it all he was eating his heart out with anxiety, suffering such agonies as fall to the lot of but few men. Constantly before his mind's eye was the picture of his beautiful wife seated in the flying train angry with him and feeling that her life's happiness was spoilt. He was able to assure himself that his most certainly was. In the bitterness of his heart he cursed the memory of the man who had brought it all about.

Still brooding on the subject he made his way back to the railway station once more, and to save time took his ticket for town. The dog-cart had not yet arrived and it only wanted ten minutes to six o'clock. Just as he was giving up all hope of seeing it and was preparing to leave without his bag, it made its appearance round the corner and drew up in the station yard. The lather upon the horse proclaimed the pace at which they had travelled. His bag was handed out and, when he had given certain necessary orders, he hastened on to the platform. He was not a moment too soon, for the train had already entered the station and was evidently anxious to be on its way once

more. The station-master opened the carriage door for him, he sprang in, the guard whistled, and the most momentous journey he had ever undertaken had commenced. Little did he guess what the result was destined to be.

He had purchased some more papers while waiting for the dog-cart, and he tried to beguile the tedium of the journey with them, but without success. He could not find anything to interest him in the political news, the society gossip nauseated him, while the foreign intelligence only served to remind him of the troubles which seemed to be falling so thick and fast upon him. Even tobacco seemed to have no flavour, though his cigars were about the best on the market. Meanwhile the train rolled along through the darkness, stopping at station after station until he felt as if he had a genuine grievance against the Company for the slowness of their time table.

Everyone who knows Welford Road Station must, I am sure, be prepared to testify to the fact that it is the jumping off place for the dullest stretch of country in that particular part of England. The station itself is a small affair, and the buildings consist of the station-master's house, a galvanized waiting room, a ticket office, and a lamp shed. On either side of the line you have the cheering prospect of undulating stretches of moorland, with

here and there an attenuated fir tree which seems to be apologizing for its very existence in such a desolate region. So far as the casual observer is able to judge from the train as it sweeps across it the only inhabitants are gypsies and an occasional carrier's cart, though where the carrier comes from and whither he goes, it would tax the greatest brain to imagine. It may be to allow the station-master and the solitary porter to see as many of their fellow humans in the course of the day as possible that the trains stop at Welford Road. The train by which Carminster travelled pulled up at the platform, thus throwing the last shovelful of coal on the furnace of Carminster's wrath. He let down the window and put out his head with the intention of giving the guard a piece of his mind, but just as he was about to do so, the station-master, accompanied by a dapper looking little gentleman somewhat horsily attired, made his way along the train saying something at the door of all such carriages as were occupied.

"Look here, Station-master, these frequent stoppages are really too bad. If it goes on like this we shall never reach our destination."

"I am sorry, sir, that I have not got sufficient time to go into that question now," answered the official. "I am looking for Lord Carminster, who

joined the train at Kelston. He is wanted very badly."

"I am Lord Carminster. What is the matter?"

Here the little pleasant-faced gentleman entered the conversation.

"My lord," he said, "I am afraid I have some news that will distress you. Perhaps as the train must go on it would be as well if you alighted."

"Does your news concern my wife?" he asked, with a sudden sinking of his heart. "For Heaven's sake, man, speak up."

"I am sorry to say it does," the little man answered. "She is here, but really we must not keep the train waiting."

Carminster took his bag from the rack and immediately stepped out on to the platform. The door was shut, the guard whistled, and the train went on its way once more.

"Now for mercy's sake tell me what is the matter. You frighten me nearly to death."

"You must calm yourself, my dear sir. After all it may not be as serious as we suppose. She was taken ill on the journey, and now lies at my house three miles from here. I am Doctor Bridgenorth, and I have a brougham outside in which I can run you over in next to no time. As we go I can furnish you with a full account of the case."

Together they crossed the platform and passed into the road outside, where a smart motor brougham awaited them, its lights glaring like two demon's eyes into the darkness. In spite of his attempts to conceal the fright he had received the little doctor noticed it.

"Come, come, my lord," he said. "You must not give way. But in case you did I took the precaution of bringing with me a flask of the finest brandy that was ever drunk by mortal man. Let me fill you the silver cup full and I think you will find yourself quite a different man in a few minutes. It was given me by a grateful patient and I wish him long life for the excellence of his gift."

While he had been speaking he had taken off the little silver cup and had filled it almost to the top. It was of unusual strength, but by the time they had proceeded little more than a hundred yards on their way, Carminster found, as the doctor had predicted, that he was a different man.

"I cannot be grateful enough to you for your kindness to my poor wife," he said. "Please tell me everything. Is the matter very serious?"

"I sincerely trust not, but of course one doesn't like to speak too soon. The fact of the matter is she is of a very highly strung nature and, if I

may hazard a guess, she has received some shock which has exercised a bad effect upon her."

"Nobody knows that better than I do," replied the repentant husband. "Especially as it was to a considerable extent my fault. Well?"

"Well, the fact of the matter is, in the train she must have carried out an intention previously formed."

"Good Heavens, what do you mean?"

"I hoped you would have been able to guess it without my being obliged to tell you."

"Do you mean to say that she tried to kill herself?"

"Unfortunately, yes! In a short time the other occupants of the carriage noticed that there was something wrong and, just before the train reached the station where you alighted, they pulled the communication cord and the train drew up at the platform, which is not a usual stopping place for the express. As good luck would have it I had motored over from my house, which is situated in a pretty valley as I said about three miles from the station, to meet a friend. He's a brother Medico, and between us we put her in the carriage and took her to my house, but not before we had treated her in the station-master's cottage. While we were thus occupied a telegram was dispatched

to the station-master at Kelston asking that a messenger might be sent to inform you. Judge of our surprise, therefore, when the message came back that you had also left for London. Leaving her in the care of my wife and friend I returned to the station to meet you and break the news to you as gently as I could."

" You have been kindness itself, and I can never be sufficiently grateful."

" Tut—tut—tut—you must not talk like that. It is just what we medical men are sent into the world for. Where would our profession be if people were not taken ill occasionally? Sometimes I am almost tempted to wish that science were not stamping out disease as it is. The folk in these parts are so abominably healthy that I have had to take to motoring to fill in my spare time."

To this speech Carminster offered no reply. The effect of the brandy was wearing off and with its departure he experienced a curious distaste for conversation. Yet the little doctor prattled on with amazing volubility. In the way of small talk all was grist that came to his mill. He described the social condition of the neighbourhood, the sporting opportunities, and told stories innumerable until his companion found his brain in a whirl. Despite his anxiety he felt that if this state of things continued much longer, he should

become hypnotized by mere sound and should most certainly drop off to sleep. Doubtless his brain had been overtaxed that day, for this did actually come to pass. Little by little, in spite of attempts to recover himself, his head dropped back on to the cushions and presently he became unconscious of his surroundings.

Then it was that the little man did a very curious thing. From his pocket he produced a small electric torch, the light of which he turned full and fair upon the sleeping man's face. He lifted his eyelids, gazed upon the pupils, felt his pulse, unfastened his collar, and then gave a chuckle of satisfaction. Putting his head out of the window he addressed the driver in Italian : " You can go ahead now, Martino, as hard as you like. Everything is right here."

" Good ! " replied Martino, and the car shot forward at an increased speed while the unconscious peer inside breathed heavily, but showed no signs of waking. For upwards of an hour they proceeded on their way at a speed that at any other time would have been considered more than dangerous. Up hill and down dale they went, the lights shining on the hedges on either side and upon the pools of water upon the road. Villages were little more than a few lamp lit windows, which later on became like the abodes of the dead.

Suddenly the car came to a stop and a voice said something to the driver. The little man lowered the window, whereupon a face with a ferocious grey moustache looked in. In a low voice the stranger said, "You have succeeded?"

"Admirably," was the reply. "Nothing could have been better. He walked into the trap without a shadow of suspicion. How much further have we to go?"

"About ten miles. I will go on and make sure that all is prepared. I congratulate you most heartily on the work you have done. It will be remembered."

Next moment there was the sound of a motor bicycle starting, and the brougham once more continued its journey. Still Carminster slept on, proving beyond doubt that the drug which had been administered to him must have been a more than usually strong one.

In less than half an hour the brougham again came to a standstill. There was the smell of the sea and the sound of waves breaking upon a beach could be distinctly heard. The same individual who had stopped the carriage on the road from Welford Station approached it now and opened the door.

"Not recovered yet?" he said in a voice that betrayed his satisfaction. "That's good! The

boat is quite ready so we will lose no time in getting aboard. You take his shoulders, while I take his heels and we'll carry him down."

But Carminster was a big and also a heavy man and, in consequence, the pair found the operation easier to propose than to accomplish. However, with the assistance of the *chauffeur*, they eventually accomplished it and, having done so, bore him across the sands to the water's edge where a boat showed black against the foam of the breaking waves. Two more men, evidently sailors, were standing beside her, and they lent their assistance in placing the unconscious man in the stern of the boat. The taller of the leaders of this precious party, I refer to the rider of the motor bicycle, took the man, Martino, on one side and held a short but animated conversation with him, after which the latter returned to the brougham, while the leader clambered into the boat which the two sailors immediately pushed off, springing in as soon as she was afloat. The oars were out in less time almost than it takes to tell, and the little craft was soon cutting her way through the smooth black water at racing pace. There was a distinct touch of frost in the air and overhead the stars shone like millions of diamonds in the sky, and were reflected in the water below until it looked as if the heavens were turned upside down. Not a

word was spoken by anyone during the voyage, until the tall man pointed ahead and said : " There she is ! "

As he spoke a long dark object showed up above the horizon. It looked to be further away than it really was—as a matter of fact scarcely a hundred yards separated them from it and these were soon overcome.

As they drew nearer she proved to be a steam yacht, possibly of some four hundred tons. There was one remarkable thing about her which a sailor would have noticed and probably commented on at once.

That was the fact that she showed no lights of any sort of description, not even a riding light, although she was at anchor. A voice from aboard hailed the boat.

" Boat ahoy. You're out late ! "

The tall man immediately shouted back :

" A fisherman must live."

He had scarcely said this before the boat drew up at the foot of the accommodation ladder. With the assistance of the two sailors, the tall man and his smaller companion lifted the unconscious Carminter out of the boat and carried him up the ladder to the deck above. They were received there by a burly, bearded man with a deep bass

voice, who wore a pilot jacket and a yachting cap and proved to be the captain of the vessel.

"Glad to see you managed to bring it off after all," he said, stooping to look at the unconscious figure in the men's arms. "Well, you'd best get him below as soon as possible and then we'll be off. We don't want to set those damned coast-guard fellows wondering what we're doing here. As likely as not they're nosing around us as it is, in the hope of finding out who we are."

The others saw the wisdom of this and his lordship was accordingly conveyed to the cabin which had been prepared for him on the starboard side of the elegantly furnished saloon. The yacht was certainly a handsome craft, that is if her appointments counted for anything. But there was a certain air of unpreparedness about her that was somewhat difficult to account for. There was a scarcity of those dainty cushions on the couches that is not usually the case on such craft; the brass work on the doors, the swinging trays, and the sideboard stood in urgent need of a polish, while there was a musty smell about her that would have almost led one to believe that she had not been in commission for a very considerable time past.

The men carried their burden into the state room allotted to him and laid him in the bunk. He

still showed no sign of returning consciousness. The sailors withdrew and left the tall man and the other who had called himself Doctor Bridgenorth together.

"He sleeps well, doesn't he?" said the latter.

"I hope you haven't overdone it," answered the other. "I know you're as clever as Satan at this sort of thing, but even the cleverest of men are apt to make mistakes at times."

"My dear Barraclough," returned the doctor, "I haven't studied medicine for thirty years and in three countries, without knowing something about it. He will recover consciousness before dawn and then I hope he'll see the humour of the thing. 'Gad, what a surprise is in store for him when he wakes, if he only knew it. Hark! there goes the anchor, now for the open sea. I shall sleep like a top to-night."

"I'm afraid I shan't," replied Barraclough. "I've been as jumpy as a cat all day, imagining all sorts of horrors. First I thought you wouldn't be able to bring it off, then that he would get suspicious at the last moment and that we should be done for—lock, stock, and barrel."

"I know what you want. Come into the saloon and I'll give it to you."

They went into the saloon where the little doctor took from the swinging tray a bottle of brandy,

half a glassful of which he poured out for his companion, doing the same for himself.

"I'll give you a toast," he said, holding his tumbler aloft.

"What is it?"

"Success to the enterprise, and may the Devil take all traitors!"

CHAPTER V

WHEN Carminster woke next morning it was with a splitting headache and an intense feeling of nausea, which was in no way to be confounded with sea sickness. He ached in every limb and trembled like a frightened child. At first he believed that he must still be asleep and dreaming. He was not in his own comfortable room in Carminster, while the bed upon which he lay resembled a box more than anything else. There was also a peculiar rolling motion, but this he attributed to the feeling of giddiness that possessed him rather than to anything else. At last, with an effort, he managed to raise himself on his elbow and look about him. His surprise may be better imagined than described. He found himself in a ship's cabin, and that ship, whatever she was, was rolling as if she were endeavouring to discover how far she could go over before capsizing. But how had he got on board her? He tried to collect his thoughts, but in vain. There was such a buzzing

noise in his head that they refused to be concentrated. He closed his eyes and almost instantly fell asleep again. How long he would have continued to sleep it is impossible to say, had he not been roused from his slumbers by a rapping on the cabin door. The man who entered was quite unknown to him, but he was evidently a steward. In his hand he carried a tumbler—three parts full of some liquid.

"The doctor told me to bring you this," he said. "It's a brandy and soda."

Evidently the man was not aware of the identity of the person he was waiting upon, but Carminster did not notice this, nor did he remember, or realize, the effect that the so-called brandy and soda of the previous evening had produced upon him. The potent spirit revived him as if by magic and, after a few minutes, he was able to leave the bunk and stand upon the deck. Even then, however, he was so weak that, had he not held on to the edge of the berth, he would have assuredly fallen the first time the vessel rolled. When she did roll, his kit bag slid out from under the settee, crossed the cabin, and hid itself beneath the bunk.

"Good heavens, what can it all mean?" he asked himself. "How did I get here and bring my bag with me?"

Then the memory of his journey to town flashed

back on him ; he recalled the stoppage of the train at Welford Road Station, and the news he had received there.

" And I am here, going Heaven only knows where, while Alice may be dying and wondering why I do not come to her ? "

The reason of their quarrel next came back to him, and he remembered that this was the day of the inquest. A great wave of fear swept over him as he realized what might be thought when he did not put in an appearance at it.

" I was the last to see him and, when they discover that both Alice and I have run away, they will most certainly come to the conclusion that it was I who killed him. My honour will be lost for ever. Even if I get back to England I shall never be able to look the county in the face again. It is enough to make a man cut his throat or throw himself overboard. And Alice, poor little Alice, what will become of her ? And to think that it was my insensate jealousy that did it ! "

He ground his teeth in bitterness, and then staggered across the cabin to the port-hole. Looking through it he could see nothing but a vast expanse of grey green water ; of land there was not a trace. He poured out some water and bathed his face and hands, then, having readjusted his collar and tie, which were the only parts of

his attire that had been disarranged on the previous evening, he began to consider what he should do next.

"I wonder if I have been locked in," he said, and reeled across the room to the door.

He turned the handle and it opened. It was evident that his captors, whoever they might be, had no intention of keeping him in durance vile. Holding on by the door post he entered the saloon and looked about him. He stared and stared and stared again, and then drew his right hand across his eyes as if he thought he must be dreaming. If it was not his own yacht, which he had not set foot on for more than a year, it was one so like her that he would have defied anyone to tell the difference; the rosewood fittings were the same, the inlaid sideboard, the decorations, the very pictures let into the panelling were identical. No, the matter was beyond dispute—it was his own yacht! But, if so, who had chartered her, and what was he, its owner, doing on board? The attempt to solve the problem made his brain reel. The whole thing was beyond his comprehension. He was still trying to puzzle it out when who should descend the companion ladder but the little doctor who had met him at Welford Road Station to inform him of his wife's serious condition. What was he doing here? The case

appeared to be becoming more and more complicated every minute. He approached Carminster and held out his hand, but the other pretended not to see it.

"Come across to my cabin," said Bridgenorth, "and let us have a talk together. I can see you have a lot of questions you are anxious to put to me."

Without a word Carminster followed him and they entered, and the door was closed behind them.

"You want a little more brandy and soda," said the doctor, and he accordingly mixed him another dose. Brandy and soda was the doctor's prescription for almost everything.

When he had drunk it Carminster sank down upon the settee and prepared himself for battle.

"I should like to know what all this means?" he began. "I want to know who brought me here? And how is it my yacht is being used in this disgraceful fashion without my permission? I promise you that, whoever is responsible shall be made to suffer for the outrage. Now, sir, I am awaiting your explanation."

"And I regret exceedingly, on my part, that I am unable to afford you any satisfaction in that direction. I am not my own master in this affair; but I can tell you this much, my lord, that if, to

use a vulgar phrase without meaning any disrespect, I say, if you behave yourself, you will be treated with every consideration and, when the proper time has arrived, will be permitted to return to your home."

This speech caused Carminster's blood to boil over.

" You mean that you have kidnapped me for purposes of your own, and on board my own yacht too. I suppose you are going to hold me for a ransom, but I give you my word that penal servitude will be your only reward."

" We are asking no ransom from you, my lord," the other replied, with some stiffness. " All we desire is your presence for a short time."

" What do you mean by a short time?"

" There again, I am not at liberty to inform you. But you may rest assured that it will not be for any longer than we can help."

" But, heavens, man, I am due to give evidence this afternoon at the inquest on Mr. Tremayne, my guest, who was so foully murdered on my property. My honour is at stake, and when it is found that I am not there, that to all intents and purposes I have run away to avoid the inquiry, public opinion will be certain to jump to the conclusion that it was I who committed the crime."

"You are too well known, my lord, and too highly respected for anyone to believe that!"

"Then again there is my poor wife, who you give me to understand made an attempt upon her life. What is to become of her?"

The little man half smiled and then repressed it.

"There again, I have to crave your forgiveness," he said. "But I fancy the news I have to tell you will be less distasteful than what I have already given you. Lady Carminster's attempt upon her life was merely a lure to induce you to alight at Welford Road Station. For all I know to the contrary, her ladyship at the present moment is in the best enjoyment of health."

Carminster made an attempt to spring to his feet in order to clutch the other by the throat, but he fell back upon the settee.

"You villain!" he cried. "You dastardly villain! If I had the strength I would strangle you. But you shall pay for it yet, if there is a law in England."

"The English law has no great terrors for us," retorted the doctor. "I must confess I regret that it was necessary to resort to means which scarcely redound to one's credit as a gentleman, but it could not be helped. Had you proceeded to London our difficulties would have increased a thousandfold,

so the only expedient left to us was to waylay you at some quiet roadside station. We chose Welford for the simple reason that it was not a great distance from the sea."

Lord Carminster rose from his seat and went to the door. Clutching the handle, he turned to Doctor Bridgenorth.

"It is the vilest trick that was ever played on a man," he said. "But, as I have already said to you, you will suffer for it!"

"One is often compelled to resort to strange tricks in order to achieve one's ends," observed the other. "But I do not think when all is over you will be so bitter against us as you are at this moment. Of course, I cannot say for certain, but I venture to believe that you will agree to the correctness of my assertion."

Carminster disregarded this speech entirely. He was too angry to credit such a thing and too suspicious to trust a man who had already so cruelly deceived him.

"Perhaps you will be good enough to tell me where you are taking me?" he said, in the tone of one who is accustomed to being obeyed.

But the little man was not to be caught napping.

"It would be more than foolish of me if I were to tell you that," he answered. "My reputation for astuteness would vanish immediately. I can

tell you this, however, that if you ask the question with a view to effecting an escape, it will be better for you to abandon the idea altogether. We shall cruise on the high seas."

"But I know the coaling capacity of the yacht. It cannot hold out for ever."

"By sailing her we shall economize our coal. That point does not seem to have struck you. No! no! my lord, our plans have been most carefully laid, and even your lordship's well-known cleverness will not be sufficient to overturn them. Can we not look at the matter from a common sense point of view? It is a lamentable fact that you are a prisoner and that you cannot get away? Why, therefore, not make the best of a bad bargain, and meet matters in a philosophical way? Taken all round, I think I may say we are a sociable ship's company, and will do our best to make you as comfortable as possible. It may seem discourteous to you to say so, that in some respects your yacht is not quite what she might be. For we had to make our preparations hurriedly. But so far as the living goes, we have done our best to consider your comfort."

"That is a poor consolation to me when I know that, from to-day, I shall be regarded by my friends and foes in the light of a murderer. However, I see that it is no use arguing with you, so I will

leave you. Am I to be kept a prisoner down below, or am I at liberty to go on deck?"

"Your lordship is at liberty to go where he pleases. We place no restriction on your movements."

"Is not that a trifle inconsistent? Supposing that I were to take it into my head to jump overboard, what then?"

"In that case you would be doing what is popularly called cutting off your nose to spite your face. I have already told you that it will not be very long before your freedom will be restored to you, with abject apologies, should you wish it, on our part, for having detained you."

"Abject apologies will not be sufficient for me," remarked Lord Carminster scathingly. "I have warned you that I intend punishing you for the outrage you have committed, and nothing will make me reconsider that decision."

With that he left the cabin and went to his own to procure the cap he had worn in the train. Having found it he made his way up to the deck.

It was a bright, sunshiny morning with an azure sky, across which fleecy clouds chased each other as if anxious to see who could get over the horizon first. The yacht was bowling along under three-quarter sail; every inch of canvas drawing, and the spray flying over her bows and rattling

on the deck like so much hail. Carminster had once been an enthusiastic yachtsman, and he had been prouder of this particular craft than of any he had ever possessed. On this occasion, however, he found nothing to enjoy in it; he had too much else to think of. He could well imagine the consternation that would exist at Carminster when neither he nor his wife made their appearance. A hot flush swept over him as he imagined what the Inspector of Police would think. The papers would be certain to get hold of it, and he seemed to see the headlines :

MORE NEWS OF THE TERRIBLE
MURDER NEAR KELSTON.

MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF LORD AND LADY
CARMINSTER.

Possibly they would even chronicle the finding of the Coroner's Jury to the effect that he had been found guilty and that a warrant had been issued for his arrest. He could imagine what his dear old father and mother would have said, and he thanked God, for the first time in his life, that

they lay asleep in the family vault. That there might possibly be some who would believe in his innocence he had no doubt, but they would form a terrible minority. The mere fact that Tremayne had stayed at the Park, that the pair had gone shooting together with only one keeper and no beaters, and that he had sent Giles away on an errand, after which Tremayne was never seen alive again, would in their minds convict him out of hand. The station-master at Welford Road would swear to the fact that Lady Carminster got out at that station and drove away in a motor car. That about two hours and a half later her husband alighted there also, was met by the same stranger who had met her ladyship, and that, after a brief conversation in private, they both entered the same motor car as before and drove away, since which time nothing had been heard of either of them. This damning array of facts would have told against the most highly-respected man living. On the face of them, they were incontrovertible. Then there came a thought that metaphorically brought his heart into his mouth—a thought so terrible and overpowering, that he felt crushed beneath its weight. What if they should find his wife and arrest her? What would she think of him for running away and abandoning her to her fate? She

would then feel that the suspicions she had entertained must have been correct.

"Curse them! curse them!" he muttered. "Here I am chained by the leg—powerless to do anything."

He walked aft and stood at the taff-rail gazing down at the churning wake. Would it not be better for everyone and far better for himself if he were to drop quietly overboard and disappear for ever? But no! that was impossible. He had the family honour to think of and to vindicate. As soon as he was at liberty to do so, he would boldly face his accusers and defy them to prove the case against him. There was only one redeeming feature about the whole miserable business—only one gleam of hope—and that was that by the time he was liberated and found himself in England once more, the police might have succeeded in discovering the real criminal. But it was a very frail reed to trust to. They say the unexpected always happens, but it does not do to place too much confidence in it, especially when a matter of life and death is concerned.

From a contemplation of the water under the counter he turned and looked up at the towering canvas. For some strange reason—what it was he could not have explained—it comforted and in a measure soothed him.

Leaving the after part of the vessel he made his way forward. Very possibly he was prejudiced, but he did not like the look of the crew. They were what is often called a "scratch lot," and had none of the smartness which one is accustomed to associate with English yachtsmen. They wore no uniforms, but looked as if they had been picked up in the purlieus of some big shipping port. On the bridge, in earnest conversation with a tall man, was a clumsily-built fellow with a bushy black beard. He wore a pea jacket and a red woollen comforter round his neck and a yachting cap on his head. From the orders he rapped out now and then, Carminster set him down as the captain; a very different skipper to poor old Tomlinson, who had commanded the yacht for him. After a while, the taller man, who was by no means ill-looking and sported a fierce iron grey moustache, turned to descend from the bridge and immediately became aware of Carminster's presence at the foot of the ladder. He raised his cap politely.

"Good morning, my lord," he said, without the slightest trace of embarrassment. "Your yacht sails well."

"It is very kind of you to say so," replied his lordship. "The more so, seeing that you have stolen her."

The other laughed pleasantly.

"I beg you won't say that. Stolen is such an objectionable word. May we not say chartered?"

The man's impudence was astounding. Carminster felt as if he would have liked to knock him down, but when he ran his eye over his stalwart figure, he had to admit to himself that the other would, in all probability, prove a tough customer to handle. There was "adventurer" writ large all over him; the keen, hawk-like eyes, the fierce moustache, the air of easy confidence, all were there. He might have been a professional gambler, a spy, a gun-runner, a promoter of revolutions, anything you please, provided there was money in it and the risk was sufficiently great to make it exciting. Europe teems with such men, whom the Police and the Chancelleries in every country are ever watching and suspecting. It is usually a short life they lead; but while it lasts it is apt to be a merry one.

"It is kind of you to call it chartering her," answered Carminster sarcastically.

"And yet it is the only term I can truthfully use," retorted the other. "We shall be prepared to pay you any sum you may ask in reason for the use of her."

"With a draft drawn on the Bank of Love, or Fashion, I suppose?"

The other ignored this insult as if he had not heard it. He leant his elbows on the rail and cigar in mouth stood gazing out to sea.

"Forgive me," he said suddenly, standing upright and feeling in his pocket for his cigar case. "Will you permit me to offer you a cigar. I can recommend them with confidence—they come from a friend's estate in Cuba. They have the additional advantage of having been smuggled."

Scarcely conscious of what he was doing, Carminster took one and lit it mechanically. A moment later he regretted his action, but angry as he was he could not be discourteous enough to throw it away. For two or three minutes they smoked in silence. More than once Carminster stole a glance at his companion's face. He had a haunting feeling that he had seen him somewhere before, but where it was he could not for the life of him tell. And yet it was a face that one would not be likely to forget.

"Do you know?" he said at last, "I believe this is not our first meeting, though where we met I am at a loss to say."

"I am afraid I cannot help you. The world is a big place, and I have been knocking about it from my boyhood up."

"It was somewhere in Europe, I am certain,"

continued Carminster, "but it must have been many years ago, for as a rule I seldom forget a face I have once seen."

"I am honoured to think that you should recollect mine. It is often dangerous, but still oftener advantageous, to be able to recall a countenance. Let me give you an instance. It was in Cochin-China, and I had only arrived that day. I may tell you *en passant* that, like many other people, I am extremely superstitious. When I go into a country, if anything goes wrong on the day of my arrival, I firmly believe that fortune will be against me so long as I am inside its borders. Well, to continue what I was saying, I had arrived in Cochin-China and had presented my credentials to the authorities. The Commander-in-Chief, with his usual courtesy, invited me to dinner and also several prominent residents to meet me. We assembled for absinthe in his verandah before dinner. Though I did not know it, only one guest was late, and he was the merchant with whom I had come into the country to do business. Presently a smart little man, typically French, made his appearance. I recognized him immediately and, when he had been received by the General, I hastened forward to him with outstretched hand.'

"‘‘ My dear Lepage,’ I said, ‘ how extraordinary that we should meet out here. I quite imagined that you were still in Strasbourg.’

“ I had no sooner said it than his face turned the colour of the ash of my cigar and a complete silence fell upon the group. Now, had I known that Lepage was the man who, for many years had been acting as the intermediary for conveying secret documents from France into Germany, I would have bitten my tongue off before saying those words. The French Government had been hunting for him for years, but had never been able to lay hands on him, while all the time he was trading in Cochin-China under the name of Segmuller. He was placed under arrest there and then, and was deported back to France where, the case being proved against him, he was sentenced to perpetual imprisonment. Needless to say our dinner party was completely spoilt, and I did no business in the country. That is why I say it’s a dangerous thing to remember names and faces. Now, if you will excuse me, I will leave you.”

He went forrad and Carminster strolled leisurely aft, racking his brains in an attempt to remember where he had met the man before. The wind was blowing cold, so he determined to go below for his great coat. He had reached the

foot of the companion ladder and had just entered the saloon, when he uttered a cry of amazement. *For standing before him was no less a person than his wife!*

CHAPTER VI

AT first Carminster thought he was seeing a ghost. The whole thing was too impossible—too incredible to be believed. His wife on board the yacht while he had believed her to be hundreds of miles away. While he had been eating his heart out on her account, she had been only a few yards away from him.

"Alice," he cried, "what on earth does this mean? How comes it about that you are here?"

She drew herself up with infinite scorn.

"I might put the same question to you," she answered. "This is your yacht and I was kidnapped and brought on board her. I did not understand at first, but the meaning of it all is clearer to me now."

"Surely you do not think that it was I who brought you here?" Carminster cried.

"I don't think I should be very much to blame if I said that the facts, as I see them, appear to point in that direction. To begin with, how could these men obtain possession of your yacht without your

permission? I am carried off and the first day we put to sea I find you on board her. You tell me you have also been kidnapped. Surely your own yacht is a curious place for imprisonment?"

"And yet, Alice, I swear to you upon my honour that it is the truth. We are the victims of some diabolical plot. The two leaders in the business make no secret of the fact that they obtained possession of the craft for the purpose; for what reason I cannot say. When I discovered that you had left for London I determined to follow you by the next train. At Welford Road Station I was met by a little man who said he was a doctor, and who told me that you had endeavoured to take your own life in the train by means of poison."

She stared at him incredulously.

"I try to take my own life?" she cried. "The thing is too absurd. But go on, let me hear the rest of the story."

"He said that he had taken you to his house, where you were lying in a dangerous condition, and begged me to come to you at once. Needless to say, I was only too anxious to do so."

Her lips curled a little as he said this.

"There is only one thing I do not understand," she observed with ominous complacency, "and that is, how did they know you were following me?"

"They did not know it until they had telegraphed to the station-master at Kelston, asking him to send a message to the Park to inform me of what had happened to you. He replied that I had left by the six o'clock train. Then, of course, they knew what to do."

"I see—go on!"

"Naturally, the news he gave me upset me exceedingly, and I did not hesitate for a moment in coming to you, as I supposed. As I was getting into the motor-brougham the doctor persuaded me to take some brandy and water. I did so, and we set off as I supposed for his house. Eventually I fell asleep, and remember nothing more until I found myself on board the yacht. Ask yourself, dear—"'

On hearing the last word he saw her lips twitch and a different expression flit across her face. As it turned out, her experience had been almost identical with his. She had been told that her husband had met with a serious accident, and had been conveyed to a doctor's house in the neighbourhood. Like him, she had been drugged and, like him, she had fallen asleep. When she came to her senses she too was on board the yacht.

"But how could I have got to the station ahead of you?" Carminster enquired. "You knew, for I told you, that I was going to the Home Farm."

"I knew it," she answered. "But when I was told this about you I thought it must only have been an excuse to get away without my discovering that you had gone."

"Surely that should prove to you that I knew nothing of your capture? You believe me, do you not, Alice?"

Some thought must have struck her, for the old hard expression came into her face.

"Yes, I believe you," she answered. But there was no genuine ring in her voice. "What do you think their reason can be for taking us out of England like this?"

"I only wish I knew," he replied. "I have worried myself more than I can say trying to fathom their motive but, do what I will, I cannot explain it. We have been such quiet people; we have not mixed in politics or attracted attention in any sort of way. At first I thought they must be holding me in the hope of obtaining a ransom, but they scouted the idea. And the strangest part of it all is they have given me their assurance that we shall not be detained very long. The whole matter is beyond me. The only thing I can suppose is that, in some way or other, we must be the pivot upon which some gigantic machinery is revolving. There can be no doubt that the men are clever;

that they are unscrupulous we have the best of proof."

She seated herself on the woodwork of the saloon skylight and sat gazing at the deck as if she found something to interest her there. After a few moments' hesitation her husband crossed and took his place beside her. At first he thought she was going to move away from him, but she did not do so. She was trembling in every limb.

"Alice," he said, "is it to be always like this between us? I did you a cruel wrong when I said what I did yesterday. I do not wish to excuse my conduct in any way, but my temper got the better of me."

He took possession of her hand and waited for her to speak. Her voice, however, failed her and a long silence ensued. He gazed at her anxiously. Did this silence mean that, while she said she believed him, she was still unconvinced that he had had no hand in the murder of Tremayne? He rose from where he was sitting and went aft to his old friends the rails and watched the bubbling water below. From forrad came the voices of men hauling on a sheet. It was evident that he had tried to effect a reconciliation and had failed. His pride asserted itself and with it his temper burst into flame. What a fool he had been to eat humble

pie to her, since she plainly did not care whether he did or did not. He would make no more advances, he would—

Just then a hand was laid upon his arm, and he turned and looked at her.

"Ronald," she said, and there were big tears coursing down her cheeks, "you must not be hurt with me. I tried to answer you, but my heart was too full, and the words would not come. You know that I love you, and that there is nothing I would not do for you. I trust you and believe in you implicitly, and I will be loyal to you through everything. I ran away yesterday because I believed that you did not care for me, that your love was gone. Try me again, Ronald, and you will see."

This time it was Carminster's turn to find a difficulty in speaking, but what he did say must have been to the point, for the look of care suddenly vanished from her face and the old love light came back to her eyes. I don't think either of them realized how much they loved each other until that moment.

"Never again, dear," he said, "will we doubt each other." And she answered "Never again!"

She took his arm and they began to pace the deck.

"I could almost go through it all again," said

Carminster, "to be as happy as I am at this moment."

She looked up at him and smiled and then gave his arm a little squeeze as if to show that she echoed his sentiment. As luck would have it, as they approached the companion entrance who should emerge but little Doctor Bridgenorth. He took off his hat to Lady Carminster and then turned to her husband.

"Did I not tell you," he said, "that you might have reason to be grateful for the voyage after all?"

Lady Carminster blushed, while Carminster himself looked very much as if he were about to make some sharp retort. What right had this man to pry into his private affairs, and, what is more, how had he become aware that there had been any disagreement between his wife and himself? But the pressure of her hand on his arm warned him not to say anything. Accordingly he held his peace. She, womanlike, grasped the situation and was quick-witted enough to see how capital could be made out of it.

"If you had told me, Doctor Bridgenorth, that my husband was going to be my companion in exile, I should not have been so unhappy."

"Unfortunately, my dear lady, it was impossible for me to do that, for the simple reason that he

might have slipped through our fingers after all, in which case neither he nor you would ever have forgiven me. However, all's well that ends well, and you may rest assured that not one of us on board will spare himself any pains to promote your happiness. In days to come, you will doubtless look back upon this little excursion with as much pleasure as it gives us to entertain you."

"I am afraid our motives will be rather different," observed Carminster somewhat stiffly.

Again there was the warning pressure on his arm, and once more he checked himself. For the second time his wife averted what might have been perhaps not an awkward situation, but at least an unpleasant one.

"Don't they say that women are never happy until they have discovered a secret. Well now, Doctor, what is your secret?"

The little medico laughed genially. "If I were to begin to tell you all the secrets I have," he said, "I should keep you sitting up night and day for a week. But I am like the Safe Deposit Company; I take them in and I lock them up and no one can obtain possession of them save the actual owner."

He had scarcely said this before the luncheon bell rang. Carminster remembered it of old, and under vastly different circumstances. In his

mind's eye he could see the merry company of witty men and pretty women he had been wont to gather about him, and hear the ripple of their laughter and the swish of dainty skirts as they obeyed the summons of "that tocsin of the soul—the dinner bell." Now he and his wife were listening to it as prisoners, without knowledge of where they were going, or how long their captivity was destined to last. The two pictures formed a decided contrast, and one that was by no means pleasant to dwell upon. However, this did not prevent him from accompanying the others down to the saloon.

As they entered it Barraclough made his appearance from the alley-way on the starboard side. With the dark rosewood panelling behind him he presented a picturesque figure of a man. With grave courtesy he bowed to Lady Carminster and hoped that she had spent a pleasant morning on deck. When she had replied they sat down to lunch—her ladyship on Barraclough's right, her husband opposite her, and Doctor Bridgenorth at the further end. The cooking was all that could be desired, and the waiting admirable in every respect. Their host, if by that name he might be described, did the honours of the table with an easy grace that told its own tale; he talked on half a score of different subjects with a certainty that

could scarcely help but carry conviction with it. He told strange tales of his wanderings about the earth, described characters he had met, related with point and humour certain episodes which at the time must have been very far from humorous. The doctor ably seconded him in his endeavours, and to such purpose did both devote their energies to the task that, for the time the dinner lasted, the attention of both Carminster and his wife was kept so interestedly rivetted that they entirely forgot the fact that they were prisoners in the others' hands. It was a strange, one might almost say an unique experience, and one which neither of them would be likely to forget so long as they could remember anything.

After dinner they returned to the deck. The night was frosty, but as both were well wrapped up they did not mind it. They both agreed that the quiet of the deck, even if it were cold, was infinitely preferable to the saloon. The yacht was still under sail, a fact which had an unpleasant significance for Carminster, for the reason that it meant they were husbanding their coal in case their voyage should be a longer one than they anticipated. He said nothing on this point, however, to his wife, for he had no desire to frighten her. After their reconciliation his only

thought was to make her as happy as was possible under the circumstances.

Until nearly ten o'clock they paced the deck together—talking, talking, talking. Anyone who might have overheard or have seen them would have had the right to be excused had he set them down for a pair of lovers, newly betrothed. Both were ineffably happy in each other's society and, for the time at least, that grim tragedy at Carmminster was to all intents and purposes forgotten, or at least set aside.

The day following was passed in much the same manner as the previous one. They promenaded the deck with automatic regularity and discussed their situation over and over again.

"Is there no way in which we could manage to effect our escape, do you think, Ronald?" his wife enquired anxiously.

"I was thinking the matter over during half the night," he answered, "but for the life of me I cannot see how it is to be managed. To begin with, we could only do it by taking one of the boats and provisioning her. That, I fear, would be an impossibility, seeing the constant and careful watch that is kept on board. Then even supposing we did manage to secure the boat, we do not know where we are, nor how long it would take us to

reach land. Besides, nothing would induce me to allow you to risk your life, or to endure the privations of tossing about on the high seas in an open boat. The only thing to be done is to wait and hope that an opportunity will present itself that we can take advantage of. We must remember always that these men are desperate characters and that, if they caught us endeavouring to outwit them, there is no saying what they might do. But don't lose heart, dear. I firmly believe that all will come right in the end. Let us wait patiently. I know it is difficult, but I fear we must make the best of a bad bargain."

She heaved a heavy sigh and then instantly regretted it.

"Never mind, dear," she said soothingly. "Since I have you I am content. I would rather be here with you than anywhere else without you. Trouble does not seem half so hard to bear when it is shared with the one person of all others one loves."

Though Carminster had spoken as he had done, his feelings were far from being what he had pretended. He was quite as anxious as his wife to be ashore, possibly more so, for he wanted to show the world—his enemies in particular—that he had not run away as they supposed, but that he was there to meet any charges that might possibly be

brought against him. Every day that he was absent would make the case look blacker against him. Then came the old well-nigh impossible hope that by that time the authorities would have succeeded in capturing the real criminal.

The next day and the day following were passed in much the same way as those that preceded them. Once or twice they caught a glimpse of land away to port, but so far distant that it was impossible to say to what country it belonged. They talked, they read, for they discovered a heterogeneous collection of books on board (relics of past voyages), and now and again they attempted a game of deck quoits, but without any marked success. There was a lack of enthusiasm about it that detracted from the enjoyment.

On the morning of the fourth day of their imprisonment Lady Carminster was unusually quiet at breakfast, so quiet indeed that her husband became alarmed lest something might be the matter with her. There was a strange, wistful expression upon her face that he tried in vain to account for. It was not one of anxiety, nor was it one of worry. It was so difficult to analyse that at length he gave it up, determining to question her concerning it when they should be alone together afterwards. This he did in their favourite spot, in the shelter of the deck house aft.

"There is something wrong with you this morning, Alice," he began, taking her hand and anxiously scanning her face. "Don't tell me there is not, because I am quite sure there is. Tell me what it is, darling, and let me see if I can put it right for you."

She hesitated before she replied and then, remembering a previous hesitation which had come within an ace of costing her her married happiness, she said nervously :

"I am afraid you will be angry with me if I tell you!"

"You need have no fear on that score, dearest! Now that we have set matters right between us, we shall not misunderstand each other again. If we do, you may be sure it will not be my fault. Now tell me everything. Has it to do with the—the murder of Tremayne?"

"Yes," she answered, but in a voice that was little above a whisper. "That was why I was so nervous of speaking to you about it."

"Well, you're not nervous now," he remarked with a forced laugh. "If you are, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Now let me hear all about it."

"But you won't laugh at me, will you?" she pleaded. "I could not bear to be laughed at as I feel now."

"I promise you I will be as serious as a judge—though as things are now-a-days that does not seem to count for much."

He paused and waited for her to continue. With a convulsive clasping of her hands she did so.

"Last night, Ronald, I had a most extraordinary dream, and it was that dream which produced upon me the curious effect you noticed at breakfast. I have tried to convince myself that it was only the outcome of a dream, but in vain. There was something so real about it that I am still as much impressed by it as I was then. I saw everything so clearly that, when I woke, I could scarcely believe that I had been asleep."

"And what was it you dreamt, dear?"

"You must not talk to me while I am telling you, or you won't see it as I do. Now listen to me. I saw you leave the house in the dog-cart, Mr.—Mr. Tremayne sitting beside you. In my mind's eye I followed you to the keeper's cottage at the end of the wood. You know that I am a stranger in the neighbourhood, and that I have never seen the place, and yet I feel sure that I can describe it to you exactly as it is. It is a thatched cottage with two small windows under the eaves; the door has a porch, over which honeysuckle twines in the summer. On either side of the porch is a window: the muslin

curtains of the one on the right hand are tied up with yellow ribbon, those of the left with blue. The little garden behind the privet hedge is well kept, and there are dog kennels at the end of the house. Am I right?"

" You could not have described it more exactly. Go on!"

" I saw you both alight from the cart, and a man with a short beard come out to meet you. He had two dogs with him."

" Quite right! Giles brought old Rambler and Topsy. Go on! This is most wonderful."

" You took your guns and, followed by the keeper and the dogs, entered the wood. After a time the keeper went away, and you called to Mr. Tremayne. But he had left you and I followed him. He hastened down the path—drive you call it, don't you?—and at last reached an open space near the edge of the wood. Here he came to a standstill as if he were waiting for someone who did not come. But while I watched I saw a man creep up to him from behind a bush with a heavy stick in his hand. He raised it and with all his strength hit Mr. Tremayne on the back of the head, felling him to the ground. Then he knelt beside him and began to feel in his pockets for something. Whether he found what he wanted or not, I cannot say, for just at that moment I woke

up trembling with fear and feeling as if I must cry out for help."

"A most extraordinary dream, truly. You didn't happen to see the face of the man who struck him, I suppose?"

She looked at him sharply as if she were anxious to make quite sure that he was not laughing at her.

"That is the strangest part of it all," she said at last. "The face of the man was that of Mr. Barraclough, our so-called host!"

"Good God!"

"Why do you say that? What is it?"

"Nothing! Nothing! I'll tell you that another time!"

"No! No! I wish to be told now," she said imperiously, with a stamp of her little foot. "Cannot you see what a state I have worked myself into? If you keep anything from me now I shall never forgive you. Who knows but that this may be God's way of allowing us to find who the guilty man is. Tell me, Ronald my husband, I beseech you!"

"Very well then, I will tell you," he said, seeing there was no help for it. "The fact of the matter is, ever since I have been on board the yacht I have had a curious feeling that I have seen this man, Barraclough, before. The story you have told me of your dream has solved the mystery

at last. It was in the High Street at Kelston on the day that I drove in to meet Tremayne. As I passed on my way to the station he was standing on the steps of the George Inn, lighting a cigar. I can recall the fact now that I noticed his fierce grey moustache. Good heavens, little woman, there may be something in your dream after all. In a measure that might account for our detention here, though not altogether. I shall have to think this over most seriously."

For the remainder of the day his face wore a troubled look which little Doctor Bridgenorth could not account for.

CHAPTER VII

THE effect produced upon Carminster by his wife's recital of the curious dream she had had on the previous night did not soon wear off. Among other things he was an imaginative man and susceptible to impressions. In this particular instance he had greater reason to be affected by it than if it had been associated with any other subject. More than once he had wondered whether the abduction of his wife and himself had any connection with the murder of Tremayne. But after giving it careful consideration he had come to the conclusion that there was nothing to warrant such a belief.

That evening Lady Carminster went to bed early suffering from a severe headache. Carminster himself remained on deck to finish his pipe in the shelter of the smoking room aft. The shadow of the house completely hid him from the view of anyone passing along the deck. He was pondering over what he considered his multiplicity of troubles when the sound of voices raised in heated argument reached his ear. The tall man, Barracough,

was evidently laying down the law to someone, and when the other spoke Carminster was satisfied that that someone was none other than Doctor Bridgenorth. He also was speaking with warmth.

"I have told you before," he was saying, "and I tell you again that the whole scheme was a mistake. My plan would have been infinitely preferable."

"I never knew a man yet who didn't think so," sneered the other. "'Wait and see' is a good motto."

"Yes, for people who want to run nooses round their necks. I, for one, don't!"

"It would not be the first time, *mon cher ami!*"

"Possibly not! But my nerve is not what it used to be. This is out and away the biggest piece of business we have ever tackled and it cuts me to the heart to think that by one slip we may make a mess of it."

"But we're not going to make a mess of it. It will all work out just as we planned."

But here their voices grew too faint in the distance for him to hear what was said. They stood for some minutes at the taff-rail and then commenced their march forward. As they drew nearer, Carminster strained his ears to catch what he could of their conversation. It may have been eavesdropping but it was surely justifiable.

"If that blackguard, Tremayne, had only played fair, we should not have been obliged to——"

Then their voices were lost behind the house and Carminster found himself staring straight before him into the darkness as if he had been turned to stone.

"Then my suspicions and my wife's dream were right after all," he muttered at last. "In some way or another they are mixed up with Tremayne's murder. Could it have been Barraclough who did it? I would not trust him any further than I could see him. That he was at Kelston when Tremayne arrived I am as certain as I could be of anything. But what could he have done to induce them to go to such a desperate extreme?"

This was a question he was quite at a loss to answer. He had been told on the Continent that the dead man was mixed up with a number of Secret Societies, but he had not altogether credited it. Gossip is so rife in Continental cities that it is often extremely difficult, if not impossible, to discover what is true and what is not. In this case there could be no doubt but that Tremayne had been mixed up with some organization of the sort, and that probably on account of an act of treachery on his part, which would have been quite consistent with character, he had been made to suffer for it with his life. That, however, was the merest conjecture on his part.

He recalled the conversation he had overheard between the two men, and endeavoured to reason out the pros and cons with himself. What was the plan proposed by Bridgenorth, and what was the other which had been eventually adopted? Was it the manner in which the murder should be committed? Possibly the doctor had considered it too risky to attempt it at Carminster, and had stated his opinion that it would be better they should try it elsewhere. Barraclough had overruled him—with the result already set down. That was the possible and probable answer to the problem number one.

The fact that the doctor had talked about people putting nooses round their necks would have but one meaning, and that meaning would be clear enough to anyone who could put two and two together. It also served to confirm his theory that a murder had been committed and that the victim of that murder was Tremayne. This was the possible and probable solution of problem number two.

And now came a more difficult question to answer. Bridgenorth had declared this to be the biggest piece of business they had ever yet tackled. What was that business? That it was not to be a single-handed affair was evident from the fact that he had used the word "they." Later "if that

blackguard, Tremayne, had only played fair we should not have been obliged to——” What would they not have been obliged to do? Why, to kill him of course. At least that was the way Carminster argued it out with himself. Then again the man who called himself Barraclough had given the other his positive assurance that their plans would work out exactly as they had been arranged, thereby clearly intimating that the end of the story had not yet been reached. What was the story, and how were Carminster and his wife interested in it? The last was the most vital question of all and, at the same time, the most difficult to answer.

For upwards of half an hour he waited where he was, hoping that the two men would return and that he might be able to learn something more definite concerning themselves and their future intentions. But they did not come back and at last, cold and stiff, he emerged from his shadowy hiding place and made his way down to his cabin—to spend half the night turning the matter over and over in his mind. Look at it as he might, however, he was no nearer an understanding of it than before. Of one thing he was quite convinced, and that was that, without a doubt, Barraclough was Tremayne’s murderer. But how to bring the crime home to him was more than he could see. Yet, if it were true, brought home it must be.

When he woke next morning it was in a far from cheerful frame of mind. His dreams had been bad ones, and he found it difficult to throw off the impression they had produced. He had seen his wife arrested, and he had been unable to save her—although he knew that she was as innocent as a little child. He had seen her in half a hundred different perils, and each one had still found him powerless to rescue her. Like another well known personage he could cry with all his heart—"Thank God for daylight!" He dressed himself as quickly as possible and went on deck. The sun was in the act of rising, and he went aft to watch him lift himself above the horizon. He glanced into the binnacle and then back at the sun.

"Why, what's this?" he said to himself. "They've turned her round, and we're going back on our tracks!" Again he regarded the compass. "Yes, by Jove, we are! There can be no doubt about that. We're going back the way we came, or I've forgotten all I ever learnt of navigation. What are they about now, I wonder? Let us hope it means that they intend releasing us before many days are past!"

Shortly before breakfast time Lady Carminster made her appearance on deck, and seeing her husband hastened to greet him.

"My dear," he said, "do you notice anything peculiar this morning?"

She looked round about her and then shook her head.

"No," she answered, "I cannot say that I do. What fresh surprise have you in store for me?"

"One that I hope may eventually prove agreeable to you," he replied. "Look at the yacht!"

"Of course I can see her. But what is there peculiar about her? The decks have been washed, and there is a man doing something to the rigging. But that seems to happen every day. Do tell me what it is, for I am most anxious to know."

"Well, can't you see that they have changed her course and that, instead of going away from Old England as we were doing, we are in reality going back to her again?"

She gave a little cry of delight.

"Oh, Ronald, do you really mean it? It seems too good to be true. You think then that they will put us on shore and let us go home?"

"It is beyond my power to tell," he said. "I have not the least notion what their plans are. The time for which they desired to keep us out of the way may have expired, and they no longer have any further use for us."

"It does not seem very complimentary," she remarked with a little grimace, "but I can put up with that, if only we can get away from this hateful yacht. To be alone with you on board

her would be Paradise, but with these men it is more awful to me than I can say. I can still feel the effect of that dream. I cannot even look at Mr. Barraclough without thinking of him as the murderer of Mr. Tremayne."

It was on the tip of Carminster's tongue to tell her what he had overheard on the previous evening, but on second thoughts he refrained. There was nothing to be gained by it, and it would, in all probability, make her more unhappy than she was at present. He was glad afterwards that he did not do so.

"Just fancy, Ronald," she said, "being together in our own home again. How lovely it will be! We will have no more visitors—at least not for a long, long time—and then only people whom we really like. You don't care about Society, neither do I!"

"Are you quite sure that you don't, little woman?" he asked, smiling down at her. "I thought every woman liked it."

"But you see I am not like every woman," was her retort. "It may be because I was differently brought up. At home we scarcely went anywhere or saw anyone. My father did not care to go out, and he did not like me to be away from him."

"A dreary life for a young girl! You must have felt very lonely at times."

"No, that is the strange part of it. You see I had never known anything different, and then again I had my house-work to attend to and my sister Gertrude to teach. As Papa set great store by what he called his 'little dinners,' and Gertrude was rather more than a handful to manage, I did not have much leisure. Let me be with my husband whom I love and I ask nothing better."

"And to think the other day I imagined that you did not love me," he replied. "What an ungrateful beast I was. I deserved to be kicked."

"Hush! hush!" she said, putting her little hand up to his mouth. "I will not have you talk like that. It was my fault just as much as yours, and, what is more, we agreed to say no more about it. You have broken the compact and deserve to be severely talked to!"

"I am an ungrateful sinner, and I defy you to punish me!"

She looked round the decks and, having made sure no one could see them, she lifted up her beautiful face to him to be kissed.

"Oh, Alice, my wife," he said, "you little know how much you are to me! Before I met you I was a man without a hope or ambition, a dismantled ship floating on the Ocean of Life, carried hither and thither by every change of tide and wind. Then help came in the shape of the most

beautiful woman in the world, and she, by God's grace, towed me into the Harbour of Happiness."

"I like to hear you talk like that," she replied, and then added with a little sigh, "but it makes me feel dreadfully unworthy. Think how good you have been to me. Remember what my existence was before I met you and what it is now. Then I had to skimp and scrape to buy the material to make myself a new dress; now, thanks to your generosity, I have more than I can wear. Then my jewellery consisted of a gold watch and ring which were my mother's, two or three silver bangles, and a small pearl brooch. Now I have diamonds such as I never dreamed of, and a jewel case so full that I am positively afraid to open it, and it has to be locked up in a safe."

Carminster slipped two of his fingers into his waistcoat pocket.

"And here is the key of that selfsame safe," he remarked. "I carry it about for security's sake."

"Oh, Ronnie, Ronnie, don't tease me," she faltered, "I cannot bear it—now that we are so happy together."

He replaced it in his pocket, and, as he did so, Barracough made his appearance from the companion door. As usual he looked as spick and span as if he were prepared for a walk down Bond Street. Everything about him was in keeping—

from the cap upon his head to his elegantly pipe-clayed shoes.

"Good morning," he said, "you are indeed an early riser. You must have been up for fully an hour. I am afraid we are not going to have a very pleasant day," he went on. "It looks as if there were bad weather blowing up from the South-West."

To avoid looking at him, the others gazed in the direction he indicated, and it certainly did look as if there were trouble brewing. Ominous clouds were rising rapidly, and, though they had not hitherto noticed it, the wind was rising with them. The sky above the long bank of cloud was of a steely grey, becoming lighter as the zenith of the heavens was reached. Strange to say, the sea partook almost of the same colour and might have been said to be almost calm. There was but little wind, barely sufficient to fill the sails, so that the yacht's progress was so slow that it required some watching to tell that she was moving.

"I suppose your skipper knows his work thoroughly?" asked Carminster, with an anxiety he could not remember ever to have felt before.

"He is one of the best sailors in the world," returned the other confidently. "I have seen him handle ships in storms, from typhoons downwards, that would have sent many a brass-bound captain

of an Orient Liner down on his bended knees in sheer terror. He has a nerve of iron and an air of confidence that makes his crew work for him where they would mutiny against another man. No, you need have no fear as to his ability. He is a genuine old salt, rough and ready, uncouth in his speech, and a barbarian as to his dress, but he is a sailor, every inch of him."

"Praise from Sir Hubert Stanley is praise indeed," quoted Carminster sarcastically. "I don't pretend to be such a paragon, but I have sailed this yacht often enough to know that I should shorten sail as things are at this moment."

He had scarcely spoken before a bellow from the bridge proclaimed the fact that the captain was doing exactly what he suggested.

"By the way," said Carminster, "I notice that we are retracing our steps. May I ask the reason of this?"

"The explanation is a very simple one," replied Barraclough. "We do not wish to remain too far away from the white cliffs of Old England. There may be developments in the business upon which we are engaged, and the high seas make but a poor post office. You observe I am quite candid with you?"

"Vastly candid," retorted Carminster, "seeing that you have told us practically nothing."

"Surely you would not have me betray State secrets," said Barraclough with one of his curious smiles. "That would be in the highest degree unprofessional. Don't you think so, Lady Carminster?"

"I only know that I want to be on shore," was her reply, and it was given with a haughtiness that surprised even her husband.

"I sincerely trust," continued Barraclough, who was not the least abashed, but seemed rather to be amused by her scorn of him, "that you have nothing to complain of as to your treatment while you have been with us? It has been our endeavour to make you as comfortable as possible under the circumstances. Had we had more time, more might have been done; as it was we had to work at fever heat to be ready for your reception. If you will tell me what it is you require, or of what you complain, your wishes shall be carried out to the letter—with one exception, which I need not mention to you."

"I wish my husband and myself to be put on shore," she retorted with a stamp of her foot. "I want nothing else from you."

"Alas! that is the very exception to which I referred. If it were in my power to do so, I would most willingly give you your liberty, but unfortunately I cannot. I have to study the wishes of

others before my own. It is not a pleasant position for a man who once had every right to style himself a gentleman, to have to make people his guests against their will. But as Shakespeare says, ‘ We never know to what base uses we may come.’ ”

His voice as he said this would have beguiled a blackbird from a bush—so soft and sad was it. Then in a moment his buoyancy returned, and he was once more the cynical, devil-may-care adventurer to whom they were accustomed. As a matter of fact his little bit of play-acting had hoodwinked neither Carminster nor his wife. She remembered her dream in which he had figured so prominently, while he recalled the conversation he had heard on the previous night.

Fortunately for them all the breakfast bell sounded, and they went below to their meal, where the doctor joined them, his good-humoured face wreathed in smiles as if he had never known such a thing as care in his life. Whether he had heard anything of the conversation on deck or not, it is impossible to say; may be he had. At any rate, he set himself to be as amusing as lay in his power. He rattled off anecdote after anecdote, until even Lady Carminster could not refrain from laughing, furiously angry though she had been only a few moments before. During one of the pauses in the conversation Barraclough turned his head as if to listen.

"Ah!" he said, "they have got her under steam once more. The skipper evidently doesn't like the look of the weather."

"The glass has been falling headlong," observed the doctor. "I should not be at all surprised if we get a dusting before many hours are over our heads."

When they returned to the deck it was a grand, but awe-inspiring, sight that met their eyes. The bank of clouds which they had noticed rising from the south-west was now half way across the heavens spreading like an inky pall over the darkening ocean. Still the sea remained supernaturally calm, broken only by little crests of snow-white foam. The most extraordinary part of it, so Carminster has told me since, was the uncanny silence which prevailed. No one spoke save in a hushed voice, and even the skipper, who usually gave his orders as if with a fog horn, moderated his tone under the influence of this wonderful exhibition of the forces of Nature. Carminster and his wife stood beside the starboard rail and watched without speaking. She held his arm tight with hers, almost as if she were clinging to him for protection. Suddenly the mighty mass of cloud was cut asunder by a flash of lightning—so vivid that for a moment it blinded those who saw it. It was followed after an interval of only a few seconds by a terrific peal

of thunder. Then another flash and another peal, so sharp, so sudden, that ears were deafened by it.

"Take me away, Ronald, take me away," cried his wife. "I am frightened. I thought I knew what thunder was, but this is more awful than anything I ever dreamed of."

For nearly ten minutes the thunder and lightning continued. Then, after a breathless hush, came the rain—such rain as one only sees once in a lifetime. It beat on the deck with a violence that no one who has not seen such a thing would believe to be possible. The scuppers were so congested that they could not carry it off properly, and then it stopped almost as suddenly as it had begun, and, as if to compensate for its departure, there came the wind. With incredible swiftness the sea rose before it. It caught the yacht broadside and heeled her over until Carminster began to fear that she would never right herself again. He and his wife were in the companion surveying the scene through the glass windows.

"Ronald," she said, "do you think the yacht will sink?"

"Not a bit of it, my dear. I cannot say that she has ever had to face anything quite like this before; but, in spite of her age, she is a staunch little craft, and if the skipper knows how to handle her, as Barraclough says he does, she'll weather it, you may be sure."

Confident though his assertion was he could not disguise the fact from himself that he was nervous. He remembered the fact with alarm that she had not been overhauled for some time, and it was more than possible, if not probable, that she stood in considerable need of repair. Fortunately she had been well built at the beginning; but a vessel lying idle for years at a time does not improve either in appearance or stability. Had he been by himself he would not have given the matter a second thought. But he had a life to think of that was dearer than his own, and it is at such moments as these that the strongest man's heart drops into his boots.

The yacht was now rolling horribly, and the wind was howling through the rigging like the mythical hounds of the wild hunter. With every moment the sea was rising until it looked as if it must of necessity engulf her. Every timber of her fabric creaked and groaned under the strain she was called upon to endure. Now and again she gave staggering leaps forward that suggested she was trying to escape from the fiend that was pursuing her. Then a blast, stronger than any that had preceded it, caught her, and over and over she went on her port side until the deck was at such an angle that it was scarcely possible to stand upon it. Carminster, clutching at the rail with one

hand, put the other round his wife's waist. His mouth was hard set, and his wife noticed it, though he was not aware of it at the time, that he had bitten his lower lip so that a thin trickle of blood ran down his chin. Her face was deathly pale, but the bravery which comes naturally to most women at such moments of awful stress, stood by her now. She looked up at him and tried to smile.

"At least," she said, "we die together!"

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN the yacht began to heel over as described at the end of the last chapter, Carminster quite made up his mind that the end had come. It did not seem possible that she could right herself again. But the noble little craft was not beaten yet. Great as the peril had been, she slowly but surely rose to the perpendicular once more and then commenced to descend on the other side. Once more she swung back, but this time to nothing like the same angle. The wind had passed, and now she had only the rough and tumble of the sea to contend against. But even that was bad enough.

When he was sure that all danger was past, Carminster looked into his wife's face. He remembered the words she had said to him when both thought themselves standing on the threshold of death, and he knew that, however great his love for her might have been before, it was a hundred times greater now. Her perfect trust in him—her wonderful bravery under circumstances that would have tried the nerves of the bravest of brave men—

showed her to him in a new light. She commanded his respect as well as his love. But the bravery that had stood her in such good stead in the moment of real danger deserted her when the danger was past. Letting go the rail to which he had been clinging she gave a little moan and fell back into her husband's arms in a dead faint. The strain had proved too much for her after all. Carminster did not lose a moment, but picking her up in his arms, carried her down the companion ladder to the saloon below, where he placed her on a settee. Then he went in search of the doctor, whom he had seen pass along the deck only a few minutes before. He found him in the smoking-room and told him what had happened. The little man was on his feet in an instant, and was hurrying back with him to the saloon as fast as the rolling of the yacht would permit. They found Lady Carminster still lying on the settee, but she had recovered consciousness and was looking about her in a dreamy way as if she did not quite realize what had happened and why she was lying there.

"What's this I hear about your ladyship?" said the doctor as he approached her. "You're surely not going to ask me to believe that this silly little sea has frightened you. I admit she is doing some pretty fair rolling, but not enough to cause us anything but a little temporary inconvenience.

Excuse me for one moment, and I'll bring you something that will make you quite yourself in a very short time."

He went along the saloon and disappeared into his own cabin. When he emerged again he brought with him a graduating glass filled with some cloudy mixture.

"There," he said, "drink that, and you will find it will do you good. We're wonderful conjurers, we doctors, and drugs are the spirits that work our enchantments for us."

Lady Carminster drank the mixture and handed him back the glass. Before you could have counted fifty the colour had returned to her cheeks, her eyes had taken to themselves their accustomed brightness, and she was to all intents and purposes her old self once more.

"Thank you," she said, "I am very grateful to you," and then as if in explanation, "I don't think I was a coward while there seemed to me to be real danger, was I, Ronald?"

"You were courage itself, my dear," her husband replied. "It was the reaction that proved too much for you."

"Well, at any rate I am glad to see that you are better now," observed the little man complacently. "I will mix another dose of the medicine, and if you feel in need of it, your husband will find it on

the rack in my cabin. Now if you will excuse me I will return to my correspondence."

He accordingly departed, leaving husband and wife alone together.

"Do you know, Ronald," she said, "whatever he may be or whatever he may have done, I cannot help liking that little man. He has such a pleasant manner and seems to want to be so kind."

Carminster tugged thoughtfully at his moustache.

"Unfortunately," he said, "I cannot forget the fact that he took a prominent part in abducting us, and that it was in a large manner due to his pleasant manner that we were so easily decoyed."

"That is true," she answered. "And yet I still say that, however foolish it may seem, I cannot help liking him. I wonder what his history is?"

"Very much like that of every other adventurer, I expect," he replied. "Started well, and then began to go steadily down hill; one piece of roguery leading to another until there was nothing he was not prepared to do, or at least to attempt."

"It seems a pity that a life should be so wasted," said his tender-hearted wife with a little sigh. "There must be some people in the world who love him and perhaps to whom he is of almost as much importance as you are to me."

"If I were such a man would you still continue to love me?"

"I should love you always, whatever you might be," was her reply. "Nothing could ever make any difference in my love for you so long as you continued to care for me."

He stooped and kissed her. Then he helped her to her cabin and placed her in her bunk. Rolling as the yacht was that was by far the safest place for her.

Having made her comfortable he went on deck once more and looked about him. It was an awe-inspiring scene that confronted him—mountainous waves, with deep hollows between them, leaden clouds overhead, and the brave little vessel driving her way desperately onward as if she had made up her mind not to be beaten by the forces of Nature, however powerful they might believe themselves to be. Despite the danger and the gloom there was something heroic, something Homeric, in the struggle that appealed to his imagination. Holding on to the starboard rail he stood and watched it for upwards of a quarter of an hour. A couple of miles or so away a heavily laden old tramp was making even worse weather of it than they were. Every few minutes she disappeared from sight altogether, after which she would come into view again with the water pouring off her in cataracts. Before you could count twenty she was down again, and this time you were prepared to

swear that she was gone for ever—only to find that you were mistaken. Luncheon that day was served under difficulties, even the fiddles fastened upon the tables were not able to prevent things from spilling, so terrible was the rolling. As for the waiting, it would have required an acrobat of more than ordinary cleverness to have handed things and at the same time to preserve a decorous equilibrium. The sound of sliding trunks could be heard in the various state rooms, and the meal was punctuated with the noise of breaking crockery in the pantry. Carminster had endeavoured to persuade his wife not to leave her bunk, but she would not listen to him.

"I must get up," she declared. "I cannot lie here. I crave the society of my fellow humans whoever they may be. When I am alone I picture all sorts of horrors."

"Very well, then," her husband had said laughingly. "In that case you are better up, but I am afraid you won't enjoy your lunch."

"Never mind, I shall be with you. That is all I want."

For the remainder of that day and night the storm continued, and it was not until after day-break that it showed any sign of abating its fury. Then, strange to say, it died down as quickly as it had risen, and by nightfall the sea was comparatively smooth once more.

Carminster and his wife took their customary constitutional on deck that night, and both were convinced that something out of the common was about to happen. There was a peculiar air of expectancy about Barraclough and the doctor that said it as plainly as any words could speak. At dinner both men were unusually silent; they seemed nervous, and glanced repeatedly up at the skylight above the table as if they were listening for some sound they had long been expecting to hear. This curious behaviour on their part aroused Carminster's suspicions, as it was only natural it should do, and, in consequence, he watched them as closely as a cat does a mouse. That there was something important going forward he did not for a moment doubt, and he was resolved if possible to find out what that something was.

As I have already said, Carminster and his wife promenaded the deck, and it was nearly ten o'clock before the lady declared her intention of retiring to her cabin for the night. When he had bade her good-night he lit his pipe and strolled along the deck forrad. Reaching the smoking-room he paused for a moment on the threshold. Barraclough was evidently asking the following question of someone: "How long before we should pick it up?"

Then came the captain's voice in reply:

"Between three and four o'clock. We should have been earlier, but for that confounded storm. It delayed us a lot. Are you quite sure he will be there?"

"You may bet your last cent on it," the doctor said. "If he had to wait for a week he would not miss us. When you've known him and worked for him as long as I have you'll understand what I mean."

"I know him pretty well already," asserted the skipper, who was evidently not in the best of tempers. "And without meaning any offence to you, gentlemen, I must confess it beats me how you can let him haze you the way he does. I couldn't take it from any man whoever he might be."

"That's because, my dear fellow"—it was Barracough who was speaking—"you only judge by appearances. The man is all right as long as you know how to work him; if you don't, and things go wrong, you've only yourself to blame. Why, that man has pulled more European strings than any other three men put together—for all he looks so simple. For instance, do you remember the Bavotski affair in the Balkans?"

"I should think I did," answered the skipper. "I was in Constantinople at the time in the old *United Italy*—4,300 tons and fitted up for gun running better than any craft I've ever had to do

with before or since. Sunk she was in the Arabian Gulf by a British gunboat. Yes, I remember the Bavotski affair quite well, and a precious stir there was about it. The King of Roumania thought his goose was cooked that time and no mistake. But what had old Stourdza to do with it?"

"He engineered the whole affair, found the money that found the men, and would have brought the whole business to a successful conclusion, but for the fact of one of his men turning traitor at the last minute and giving the whole plot away. It's a strange thing, but in every bit of business of that description there must always be one man ready and willing to betray his comrades."

"Yes," drawled the doctor, as if he wanted to get the full flavour out of the word. "No one knows that better than we do."

The skipper gave a short and husky laugh, which was followed by a creak of his chair as he rose from it.

"Now I must be getting back to the bridge," he said. "We shall have to keep a careful look out to-night or we may chance to miss them."

Judging that it was not prudent to remain any longer where he was, Carminster hastened aft to the companion, inside which he remained for some two or three minutes in order to give the skipper time to get up on the bridge once more. Then he

emerged again and went boldly up the deck, and without pausing threw open the door of the smoking-room and entered.

He found Barraclough gracefully seated on one of the cushioned lockers with his feet on the marble table before him. The doctor was reclining in one of the easy chairs and looked the picture of contentment. Both had cigars in their mouths and drinks beside them. Whether they were really pleased to see him I am not in a position to say, but if their welcome counted for anything, they were evidently transported with joy at his coming.

"This is charmingly sociable of you," said the doctor. "Sit down and let me order you a drink. What shall it be? Whiskey and soda? Brandy and soda? You have but to give it a name."

Being resolved to humour them, in the hope that he might learn more, he decided upon whiskey and soda, and, when the steward made his appearance, the necessary order was given. Then they began to talk of a variety of topics, in fact on every one save that which Carminster was anxious to discuss, namely, the date of their release. Barraclough told weird and terrible tales of lynch law among the cowboys of Montana, of revolutions in South America; while the doctor, not to be outdone, spoke of queer adventures in the Southern Seas, of the privations that must necessarily be endured in that

great lone land stretching from Hudson's Bay through the North-West Territory into the wilds of Alaska, and last, but not least, of a certain crisis in his life which nearly resulted in his death in the capital of the Amir of Afghanistan.

"Yes," said Barraclough, "it is a precious big world to some people, and an equally small one to others. I knew a man once who had the ins and outs of the Far East at his finger ends, and who lost himself one night coming out of Leicester Square. By the way, Lord Carminster," here he lit another cigar, "I have been meaning to ask you several times, but have never been able to find a fitting opportunity, have you known poor Tremayne, who was murdered the other day, long?"

The abruptness of this question almost took the other's breath away. What on earth could his reason be for asking it? He pulled himself together and tried to speak as unconcernedly as possible. The result, however, was by no means what he would have wished it to be.

"I cannot say that I really knew very much of him. We, that is to say my wife and I, met him first in Rome, then again in Florence, and afterwards in Vienna and Paris. He seemed an agreeable companion, but beyond the fact that there were several curious stories afloat concerning

him I practically know nothing about the man."

"And yet he thrust himself upon you as soon as you returned to England? That was so like Tremayne!"

"You knew him yourself, then?" said Carminter, and as he asked the question he watched the other's face narrowly.

There was not a shadow of expression upon it. He had taken his cigar from his mouth and was examining the ash critically.

"Oh, yes," he replied, replacing the cigar in his mouth, "I have known him for many years. One could scarcely know much of a certain side of Continental life without running across Gilbert Tremayne. He was a thorough bad lot, who could not be faithful even to his own villainies. However, he's dead now, poor devil, so "*de mortuis nil nisi bonum.*"

"I wonder if they've caught the man who killed him?" said the doctor, replacing his glass upon the table as he spoke. "But there, you may be quite sure they have not. They have doubtless found half a hundred clues, but no man. That is so characteristic of our dear English police. Look at a constable in plain clothes—you have but to look at his boots to see what his calling is. As for detectives, give me the men in Paris; they're the sharpest fellows under the sun. There is very little

they don't know, and what it is is not worth knowing. Don't you agree with me, Barraclough?"

But Barraclough made no reply. He was doubtless thinking of something else.

It was evident to Carminster that the doctor was endeavouring to draw him off the scent, and that he thought it an injudicious act on his friend's part to have touched on the subject of the murder at all.

"Talking of detectives," the little man went on, "I remember once in Petersburg making the acquaintance of one of the most interesting men I have ever met in my life. He had a house in one of the most fashionable quarters which was good, and the most beautiful and charming wife, which was better still. They gave delightful little dinners, and were to be seen at every fashionable function from skating carnivals on the Neva to State balls at the Winter Palace. There never was a man so devoted to his wife, or a wife so completely wrapped up in her husband, as were those two. She had such lovely eyes, such a perfect skin, and such soft, caressing ways that every man who met her fell in love at first sight. Judge, then, the horror of all those who knew her when the news got abroad that she had been assassinated in broad daylight, and not a hundred yards from her own front door. Then the cat jumped out of the

bag with a vengeance. Our tender-hearted, bewitching little siren was not tender-hearted at all ; she was neither more nor less than one of the cleverest detectives connected with the secret police. In her time she had probably sent more unfortunates to Siberia than any other member of the force. She wormed her way into the homes of suspected families, collected evidence, and hey ! presto ! Siberia for life. What do you think of that ? ”

“ I should not be surprised at anything that happened in Russia,” Carminster replied coldly. “ It’s a country of anomalies. And now if you will excuse me, I think I’ll be off to bed. Thank goodness, she’s not rolling as badly as she did last night. It was as much as I could do to keep in my bunk. Good-night ! ”

The two men bade him good-night in return, and he accordingly left the smoking-room and made his way aft to the saloon, pondering as he went over the curious question Barracough, or the man who called himself by that name, had put to him. If he were guilty of the murder, as Carminster firmly believed him to be, what could possibly have induced him to refer to the matter ? Was it only a game of bluff, or did it contain another and more sinister meaning ? And if so, how was he to read it ?

Before entering his own cabin he looked in upon his wife and found her sleeping peacefully, one lovely arm thrown above her head and her glorious hair streaming upon the pillow.

"Poor little woman," he said to himself as he went out and softly closed the door behind him, "this is a nice gang of rogues for you to be mixed up with. Little did you dream when you married me that lovely spring morning that you would come down to this! However, I must do my best to make it up to you later. It won't be my fault if I don't!"

Ten minutes later he was in bed and within ten minutes after that he was fast asleep. How long he slept he could not say, but he remembers waking up with a vague presentiment that there was something wrong, and yet as to what that something was he could not satisfy himself. The screw was stopped, and the yacht was at a standstill. He left his bunk and went to the porthole to look out. In the distance twinkled the lights of a town, but what town it was he knew no more than the man in the moon. While he was watching it and wondering where it could be there came the sound of oars alongside, and presently a voice hailed someone on the deck above in French. Carminster felt that, at any risk, he must find out what was going forward. It was impossible to say what might depend

upon it in the future. He dressed himself hurriedly and, leaving the cabin, crossed the half dark saloon towards the companion ladder. A thin rain was falling when he reached the deck, and from where he stood, hidden in the shadow of the companion, he could see Barraclough, the doctor, and the captain leaning over the rail, while four of the crew were busily engaged lowering the accommodation ladder. Their work completed they went forrard, and Barraclough stepped on to the grating and descended to the boat alongside. After a few minutes he made his appearance again, having on his arm a tiny figure of a man, smaller even than Doctor Bridgenorth, who was far below the average stature. He was clad in a fur cap and coat and supported himself with a stick. He saluted the doctor and the captain, then looked about him as if to make sure of his surroundings. Meanwhile the boat alongside was pushing off on its return journey to the shore. For a moment Carminster was undecided how to act. He had not the least desire that they should become aware of his presence on deck, and yet he felt that, happen what might, he must catch a glimpse of that old man's face. His instinct told him that the newcomer was that mysterious Monsieur Stourdza, who had pulled the strings of the Bavotski affair.

That he was also pulling the strings of this conspiracy, whatever it might be, was more than probable, and for that reason he wanted to be in a position to recognize him should he ever see him again, or necessity arise for describing him to other people. As good fortune arranged it, they did not go to the saloon, but made their way forward to the smoking room. The skipper ascended to the bridge, and by the time the others had comfortably seated themselves the yacht was under way once more.

Keeping well in the shadow, Carminster crept along the deck and approached the room in question. Just as he reached it he heard the bolts of the door pushed to, and one by one the blinds of the various windows were pulled down. His disappointment may be better imagined than described, but he was not beaten yet. From window to window he crept with the stealthiness of a cat until at last, and greatly to his joy, he found a small place where the blind had not fallen true, leaving a small aperture through which he could take stock of those within. With an eagerness that can be easily imagined he scanned the face of the old man, and a wicked old face it was to be sure, seamed and wrinkled like a sun dried crab apple, with nutcracker jaws, and small slits of eyes that spoke for their owner's cruelty and cunning.

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"There is no fear of my forgetting him," Carminter muttered. "I should know him again if I did not see him for fifty years."

Quietly he crept back to the door in the hope of being able to hear what they were talking about, but they spoke in such low tones that it was impossible to catch a word of what was said.

Realizing this he returned to his cabin, turned into his bunk, and was soon fast asleep.

How long he would have slept I cannot say, but it was the steward who woke him.

"If you please, my lord," cried the man, "they've all gone, and there's no one to look after the yacht!"

CHAPTER IX

WHEN the steward gave Carminster the news with which he brought the last chapter to a conclusion to the effect that the men who had kept them prisoners had deserted the yacht, he was so overwhelmed with surprise that at first he could not realize its true import.

"What?" he cried, scarcely able to believe his ears. "Do you mean to tell me that Mr. Barraclough and the others have cleared out and left us?"

"That's what I do mean, m' lord," the man answered. "Mr. Barraclough, if that's his name, and with all due respect to you m' lord, I don't believe it is, the doctor, the skipper, and an old gentleman who came aboard from the shore in the middle of the night, cleared out a matter of two hours ago in a fishing boat that came alongside."

"The skipper gone too?" and Carminster began to look grave. "What about the engineers and the crew?"

"They're still aboard," answered the steward,

"but they're taking on properly about being left in the lurch like this. There isn't one of them understands navigation, and they say they don't see 'ow we're to get to port."

"They need not be afraid. I'll arrange that for them," his lordship replied. "Fortunately I hold a master's certificate and have navigated this yacht for weeks at a time. Just go forward and tell them that while I dress. It may help to ease their minds."

"Very good, m' lord, I'll do so at once," said the man with a look of relief upon his face. Doubtless he had shared the fears of the crew and perhaps had helped to exaggerate them.

When he had gone Carminster dressed himself as quickly as possible and went on deck. Thank goodness, the end of their captivity was at hand, and, provided the others did not return before he could get the yacht under way, there was nothing to prevent him from taking her back to old England. That they would return was extremely unlikely, he told himself, but of late he had got out of the way of taking chances, and he was not going to begin now. The rain which had been falling when he was last on deck had ceased now, and the stars were shining brightly. In as happy a frame of mind as a man could well be in, he made his way

to the ladder leading to the bridge. The lamps were still burning in the binnacle and in the wheel house, which was also used as a chart room. He entered and looked about him. On the locker at the further end a chart was pinned out, and upon it lay a note addressed to himself. With no small amount of curiosity he tore the envelope open and read as follows :—

DEAR LORD CARMINSTER,

It is with the greatest regret that we are obliged to leave your yacht without bidding her ladyship and yourself farewell. That the exigencies of the circumstances should have compelled us to act as we did towards you will always be to us a matter of regret. That you will be glad to be rid of us I have no doubt. I enclose herewith a Bank of England note for £100 for the use of the yacht, which you are at liberty to dispose of as you please.

Believe me,

Your lordship's obedient servant,

JOHN BARRACLOUGH.

For a moment Carminster felt inclined to tear the bank-note in pieces, but he changed his

mind, and, replacing it in with the letter in the envelope, he set to work to examine the chart. The yacht's run and present position was clearly defined. Not a little to his surprise she was lying between Traport and S. Valery. Taking up a pair of dividers he measured the distance and roughly calculated the time it would take them to reach Southampton. Then he rang up the engine room and asked the chief engineer to be good enough to come to him on the bridge.

"Good morning, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Macpherson," the other replied.

"Good morning, Mr. Macpherson. You have heard, I suppose, that Mr. Barraclough and the others have left the yacht?"

"I was present when they went over the side," he answered, "and glad I was to see them go. If I had guessed what this voyage was going to be like, they would not have bought the services of Duncan Macpherson for love or money."

"You had no idea then, when you shipped with them, what their business was?"

"I only knew, m' lord, what they told me, which was that there was a lady and gentleman coming for a cruise who had been injured in a railway accident, and, in consequence, were not quite right in their heads. I believed them, and so did the

steward and the crew, but it was not long before I found that the whole story was nothing more than a pack of lies."

"And may I ask how you found that out?"

"Because it so happened that I overheard them talking to each other. Says the doctor, "We must keep them on board till the trouble's blown over and everything is ready for the last act of the piece." This set me thinking, and bit by bit I pieced it all out in my mind."

"I am afraid there is more at the bottom of it all than we realize," said Carminster. "However, that is enough on the subject for the present. You have steam up, of course?"

"Most certainly, m' lord. We only anchored a couple of hours ago."

"Very well, then; we will make for Southampton and get there as quickly as possible. It is a fortunate thing for us all that I have passed the necessary examinations in navigation."

"Ye may well say that, for if ye hadn't, I don't know where we should be."

"Very well. Get below, and I'll have the anchor up as soon as you're ready. I want to be out of the way before they can change their minds and come back."

The engineer departed, and then Carminster

went out on to the bridge and called to a hand to send the bosun to him.

When that worthy made his appearance he explained matters to him very much as he had done to the engineer, and then gave him orders to heave anchor. Never had anything sounded sweeter in his ears than the clank of the cable as it came in through the hawse hole. A hand was already at the wheel, and Carminster had given his orders when the bosun shouted to inform him that the anchor was away. The telegraph bell rang in the engine room, and once more the yacht began to move. Already the stars were paling in the east before the approaching dawn. In half an hour it would be daylight, and, if good luck favoured them, it would not be very many hours before they caught their first glimpse of the English coast.

As he paced the bridge he pondered over the events of the past few days, and marvelled that he had kept his temper as well as he had done. Then he fell to wondering what news that wicked old fellow of a Stourdza had brought that had induced them to leave the yacht so suddenly. Was it a new villainy they were about to attempt, or had they completed their arrangements in the one which he, Carminster, had been compelled perforce to play an inglorious part?

He was still thinking of this when the steward made his appearance on the bridge with a large cup of cocoa, that stand-by of the officers of the watch, and a sea biscuit. He placed them in the wheel house and was about to withdraw, when Carminster stopped him.

"When you go back to the saloon knock at her ladyship's cabin door and inform her that I am on deck and that I should be pleased to see her when she is ready to come up. You need not say anything about the others having left the vessel."

"Very good, m' lord," the man replied, and ran down the ladder to execute his errand.

The stars overhead were growing fainter and fainter, and already the first chill of dawn was in the air, but little Carminster minded that. The men had gone, and he was free—free to go home and look the world in the face; free, if he cared to do so, to enter upon the work of bringing his late jailors to justice, or at any rate to do his best to frustrate the schemes they had on hand. Never had a cup of cocoa tasted more delicious than that which he partook of in the chart room that morning. When he finished it he examined the compass card and went outside once more. After a glance ahead he looked aft and was just in time to see his wife emerge from the companion. He

called to her, but she did not hear him. The bridge, of course, would have been the last place under previous circumstances where she would have expected to find him. She looked at the back of the deck house and then passed to the starboard side, and, not seeing him there, came forward, doubtless expecting to discover him in the smoking room. He allowed her to look in there, and then called to her from the top of the ladder. She looked up at him in surprise, for she could not understand what he was doing there.

"Come up here, dear," he said, "I have got some news for you."

She gathered up her skirts and ascended the ladder, looking about her with curiosity, for she had never been upon the bridge of a ship before. Very probably she expected to see the captain or Barraclough, and was surprised that neither of them put in an appearance.

"What does it all mean?" she asked. "Where are the others?"

"Gone!" he answered. "They left the yacht some hours ago."

He then gave her a detailed description of all that had transpired.

"Then we are free," she cried, when he had finished. "Oh, that is good news indeed! We

have done with those dreadful men for ever. Oh! I can't tell you how thankful I am. Now we can go home again as fast as we please."

"We are doing it, my dear," said her husband. We are heading for Southampton with our best foot foremost."

"And when shall we be there?"

"About this time to-morrow morning," he answered. "I am afraid I cannot promise to land you there any sooner, however willing I might be to do so."

Probably of all the days of their married life this was one of the happiest. A chair was placed on the bridge for Lady Carminster, and I am afraid that the standard rule, "Passengers must not talk to the officer of the watch," was by no means strictly adhered to. Hour after hour went by, and still she ploughed her way across the Channel. Towards the middle of the afternoon a faint smudge upon the horizon ahead gave them warning that they were approaching the English coast. Little by little it became clearer, until it became possible with the assistance of a glass to distinguish the white cliffs between Beachy Head and Brighton. Then darkness commenced to fall, the side lights were got out, and Carminster, for want of a mate, prepared himself to remain on deck throughout

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the night. But this his wife would not hear of, for he had scarcely left the bridge all day, and she knew that he must be worn out.

"Let us anchor," she said, "and continue our voyage in the morning. Now that we have only ourselves to consider and are free to do what we please, there is no necessity for hurry. Anchor, Ronald dear, and have a good night's rest. I am sure you stand in need of it."

As a matter of fact he did, for the previous night had been a disturbed one, and he had had a long and trying day upon the bridge. The yacht therefore came to an anchor off Newhaven, and, having seen the watch set, Carminster and his wife went below to dinner. Without a doubt it was the happiest meal they had partaken of since they had been on board. It was almost worth the troubles they had gone through to sit opposite each other and to know that they were free once more.

That night Carminster slept on the settee in the chart room, in order that he might be close at hand in case he were wanted. Nothing happened all night, and, with the first sign of returning day, they weighed anchor and continued their voyage. It was a bright, frosty day, and both Carminster and his wife were in excellent spirits, for the end of their trying experience was practically in view.

Keeping the coast line in sight they passed Selsey Bill, and not very long afterwards picked up the Wight. Shortly after luncheon they entered Spithead and passed thence up Southampton Water, until just as dusk was falling they dropped anchor at the yacht's old moorings. Their eventful voyage was at an end.

Having ordered a boat to be prepared, they made their way to their respective cabins; their luggage was soon ready, and in less than a quarter of an hour of their anchoring they were being pulled ashore. Having landed they made their way direct to the office of the yacht-building firm who had had charge of his vessel for the last three years. Leaving her ladyship in the cab he passed through the swing doors and asked to see the head of the firm.

"What name shall I say?" enquired the clerk.

"Tell him that Lord Carminster would be glad of a few moments' conversation with him," was the reply, and the young man hastened away to inform his principal.

"Will your lordship be good enough to follow me?" he said, when he returned, and led the way down a passage to a comfortably furnished room at the rear of the building.

Mr. Belhampton, the senior partner, was a man of about sixty years of age and the essence of respectability. He rose from his chair to receive his visitor and invited him to be seated.

"I only heard a few minutes since that your lordship had returned. I trust your short cruise has done you good?"

"That is exactly what I have come to see you about," Lord Carminster replied. "The fact of the matter is I have not been ill at all."

"But I was given to understand that your health had been seriously affected. In fact the letter from your agent, giving instructions that the yacht was to be got ready within twenty-four hours, said as much."

"Would you have any objection to my seeing that letter?"

"I will show it to you with the greatest of pleasure," Mr. Belhampton answered, and rang a bell for his clerk. "Bring me the letter we received from Lord Carminster's agent regarding the yacht," he said.

While the man was absent Carminster took the opportunity to make a little explanation.

"I am afraid," he said, "we have both been the victims of a diabolical conspiracy. I use the word deliberately, for I know of no other that fits it so well."

" You alarm me, m' lord, you do indeed," cried Mr. Belhampton. " I trust we have not done anything wrong? "

" Not intentionally, I am sure of that," was the reply.

At this moment the clerk returned, bringing with him the letter in question. This the yacht-builder handed to his client, who perused it carefully and then laid it on the table. It was to the effect that Lord Carminster, having just recovered from a serious illness, had been ordered by his doctor a short sea voyage, and that the yacht was to be ready for sea within twenty-four hours.

" That letter is a forgery. My agent's signature has been cleverly copied, but to one who knows it as well as I do, the difference is unmistakable."

" We also received a telegram from you yourself, sent off from Kelston asking us to expedite matters as much as possible."

" I dispatched no such message. May I ask who you saw in connection with the affair? "

" Let me think. So far as I remember he was a short pleasant little gentleman, with a fresh complexion, between forty and fifty years of age. He gave me to understand that he was your family doctor, and that he was going to accompany you. I asked him what was to be done about officers and crew, whereupon he informed me that the matter

had been arranged and that they would join the yacht as soon as she was ready for sea. Being naturally anxious to do all we could to oblige you, we put aside other work and devoted ourselves entirely to the yacht. Without wishing to blow our own trumpets, I think it redounds to our credit that we were able to get her ready in such a short space of time. But since you say that you never authorized her removal from her moorings, the matter becomes a most serious one for us. I trust your lordship does not think that we were cognisant of the trick that was being played upon you ? ”

“ Of course not, my dear Belhampton. I should be the last person in the world to dream of such a thing. I might just as well blame myself.”

“ But what does it all mean, m’ lord, for I must confess I do not understand it. They take the yacht away and you bring her back again.”

“ Well, if you can spare a few minutes I will give you a brief résumé of our adventures.”

“ I shall be only too glad to hear them,” replied Mr. Belhampton, and wheeling his chair round, he crossed his legs, placed his fingers tip to tip and prepared to listen.

Carminster thereupon commenced his narrative, and as he progressed the other’s amazement and indignation correspondingly increased.

"I never heard such an extraordinary story in my life," he ejaculated when the other had finished.
"But how do you account for it all?"

"I cannot account for it," was Carminster's response. "It is out of my power to do so. I have tried over and over again, but always with the same result."

"But surely you will make an attempt to bring them to justice?"

"I shall do so if I can, but I am sadly afraid that it will be useless. They are now on the Continent, and goodness only knows where we should find them."

"I should like to have a short conversation with them," said the old gentleman. "I can promise them they should suffer for the trick they played on me. I have never known such a thing happen before in all my professional career."

Carminster, having arranged that the firm should take charge of the vessel and pay off the crew, bade the old gentleman good-bye and went out to join his wife in the carriage. From the yacht-builder's office they drove to an hotel, where they intended to remain the night. On the way he dispatched a telegram to Carminster, informing them of their intention.

Next morning Carminster had made up his mind

as to his course of action. His wife was to return home, while he intended running up to Town in order to consult with his cousin, the Marquis of Derysforth, who at the time was Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. He wished to place before him the record of his experiences during the preceding week, and to ask his advice as to what he should do. This plan they carried out, and when he had seen his wife in the train going west, he caught the next going east, and in due course arrived at Waterloo. Thence he drove in a hansom to Downing Street, and arrived there almost simultaneously with his cousin.

"Why, Ronald, this is indeed a surprise," said the other as they shook hands. "I presume you were coming to see me. Then come along in."

Together they made their way to the Minister's private office and seated themselves on either side of an excellent fire, such as seems always to be found in Government offices during the winter months.

For some reason or another it struck Carminster that there was a curious sort of reserve in his cousin's manner towards himself that he had never noticed before. It was for all the world as if he were trying to be genial without being quite able to manage it. Possibly, he argued, it was only the

creation of his fancy, but even then it was not a pleasant supposition.

"Well, what have you been doing with yourself lately?" enquired the Cabinet Minister.

"That's exactly what I'm here to tell you," his cousin replied. "I want to ask your advice, for upon my word I don't know how to act myself. You have heard, of course, of the murder of that poor beggar, Tremayne, while he was staying with me?"

"Yes, I heard of it, of course," answered the other drily. "One could scarcely help doing so, seeing how full the papers were of it. By the way, it strikes me as rather a pity that you did not turn up at the inquest. To be perfectly frank with you, the Press expressed themselves rather strongly on the matter. But doubtless you know that as well as I do."

"I know nothing whatsoever about what the Press has or has not said," Carminster retorted hotly. "I have been out of England and have not seen a paper since the day preceding the inquest."

Lord Derysforth studied the pattern of the carpet intently before he continued.

"I don't want to pry into your private affairs," he said at last, "but what on earth possessed you to go out of England—after you had been subpoenaed to appear?"

"I could not help myself. I did not go of my own free will, you may be sure of that!"

"But, man alive, no one could make you go against your will. I know you too well for that!"

"Well, let me tell you my story, and you shall judge for yourself. You can spare the time, I hope?"

"Never mind that. Everything else can wait while I listen to what you have to tell me. You can have no idea of what a stew I have been in over this affair. There have been the nastiest stories going the round of the clubs, and though I've done all that mortal man could do to put matters right, it was impossible to prevent people from talking behind your back. Now then, fire away, and let me hear everything."

Once more Carminster told his story, and as it progressed the other's wonder increased. When he had finished, the Minister rose from his chair and stood with back to the fire. It was evident that he was thinking deeply.

"You are quite sure that you saw this man who calls himself Barraclough at Kelston on the day of Tremayne's arrival?"

"Perfectly sure!"

"And that he mentioned Tremayne's name when you heard him conversing with this doctor fellow on board the yacht?"

"I am as sure of it as I am sure of anything."

"And this old man, Stourdza—give me as exact a description of him as possible."

Carminster did so to the best of his ability.

"If only we could get an inkling as to its nature. Well, I shall make a point of looking into it, and it will be strange if we cannot find something about these gentry. Possibly that something may prove the means of setting all these *canards* at rest."

"God grant it may," replied Carminster. "I shall never know a happy moment until I find out who committed that dastardly deed."

"We'll find him yet, never fear. In the meantime keep up a stout heart and look the world boldly in the face. The average man judges mainly by appearances. Good-bye, and I'll let you know as soon as I hear anything."

Carminster thanked him, and was about to leave the room when his cousin's private secretary entered with a telegram. He opened it, and as he read it an expression of horror appeared upon his face.

"Good heavens! this is terrible," he said. "His Majesty the King of Rubischeim was assassinated this morning as he was leaving the palace. A bomb was thrown from the crowd, and everyone in the carriage was killed. The assassin managed

to effect his escape during the general excitement."

The Cabinet Minister and Carminster gazed at each other in silent consternation.

The same thought was in both their minds.

CHAPTER X

ON leaving the Foreign Office, Carminster made his way to his favourite club in Pall Mall. He was going to show himself there in order that folk should see that, whatever *canards* had been circulated concerning him, he had not the least intention of hiding himself from his fellow men. As he drove along he thought of the news he had just heard, and concerning which his cousin begged to preserve the strictest silence until it became a matter of general knowledge as published by the newspapers. Again and again he asked himself whether it was possible that the men who had kidnapped his wife and himself, and who had left the yacht when off the French coast before daylight on the previous morning, could have been concerned in this foul deed? If so, the murder of Tremayne became of very minor significance. And yet, so far as his own interests went, it was desperate enough in all conscience—so desperate,

indeed, that it looked as if it might end in cutting him off from his friends and all he held dear in the world for the remainder of his life.

On reaching his club he paid off his cab and entered the building. The hall porter bowed low on seeing him, for the famous Lord Carminster had always been one of the most popular members of the club. He gave his hat and coat to another servant, and then proceeded to the smoking-room, where, although it was lunch time, he felt morally certain he should meet someone he knew. Seated by the fire, his feet upon the fender and a copy of *The Times* in his hand, was old Sir George Gifton, who enjoyed the reputation of being one of the most flagrant scandal-mongers in the three kingdoms.

"Hullo, Carminster," he said, as soon as he recognized the newcomer. "Haven't seen you for the deuce knows how long. Was only saying so last night to the Duchess of Wiltshire. She said you were out of England. Couldn't get over that murder down at your place in the country. I made use of the privilege of old acquaintanceship to tell her it was all bosh. That you hadn't been away at all as a matter of fact. Hope I did right. One never knows quite what to say in these days. If you tell 'em the truth they think you're lying;

while if you tell 'em a lie, they make sure you're letting 'em have the sober truth."

"In this case it's quite true, for I have been out of England. That is to say, I've been down the Channel in my yacht and I took my wife with me. We only got back last night."

The blasè old dandy regarded him with a look of unmitigated surprise. In view of certain circumstances that had come to his knowledge this was the last thing he had imagined the other would admit; to find him doing so completely took the wind out of his sails. He did not know what to say or think, so being a man of his world, he resolved to believe that Carminster had some reason for being so vastly candid, and that, in all human probability, the reason for such candour was no better than it should be. In such a world do we move and have our being.

Leaving the smoking-room he went to the dining-room and, before deciding upon a table, looked about him. There was a huge number of members present, with more than a quarter of whom at least he was acquainted more or less intimately. That his appearance among them came as a surprise there can be no doubt, and as a result not a few began to look decidedly uncomfortable. Some nodded to him, others pretended not to see him and

kept their eyes fixed resolutely upon their plates. Not one, however, rose to shake him by the hand. He did not appear to pay any attention to their behaviour, but passing to a table in one of the windows, he had seated himself at it when he was the recipient of a hearty thwack upon the shoulder. Looking round he found himself face to face with a young man, some five and twenty years of age. He was a clean-shaven, fresh-complexioned youth, with a breezy air about him that was infinitely refreshing. Everyone liked him, and, in consequence, everyone united in declaring that it was a thousand pities he had no occupation.

"Good gracious me," he was wont to declare, "to hear them talk you'd think I was the sort of genius who could turn his hand to anything. I might make a pretty fair whipper-in, I can tie a decent fly, and I'm a bit handy with a gun. After that I'm done for!"

"Why, Bertie," said Carminster, rising to shake him by the hand, "it's good indeed to see you again. It is ages since we last met. You don't seem to have changed a bit."

"Confound it, no!" replied the callow youth. "That's just the worst of it. "I'm twenty-five, and everyone I know persists in looking upon me

as a mere boy, simply because my moustache happens to be so beastly fair and I don't tan as I ought to do. Do you mind if I have lunch with you at your table? I wouldn't have missed seeing you for worlds."

"That's more than would be said by a good many folk in this room at the present moment," Carminster replied. "I suppose you've heard some of the yarns that are going about concerning that murder on my place in the country?"

Bertie Carrington laughed good-humouredly.

"I should rather think I have," he answered. "Why some of 'em have got the notion into their addled brains that you killed him yourself. One fellow said so the other night at the Palladium, and I sat on him like a good 'un. He crumpled up like an old newspaper. But don't let us bother about that. It's all rot! Everybody who has any sense knows that!" (Hear the waiter approached the table.) "Pressed beef, please. Pint of bitter. How's your shoot this year?"

"Fairly good, I fancy," Carminster replied. "As a matter of fact, however, I've only been out once since my return, and you know what the result of that was!"

"Poor old beggar, I'm awfully sorry for you,

'pon my word I am. However, let's talk about something a bit more cheerful. Do you know I wish you could help me."

"In what way? Give me the idea and I'll see what I can do. The last time I saw you you thought of starting as a wine merchant and working up a connection with the clubs. Wait a minute, though, I'm wrong; the latest idea, I think, was a scheme for breeding polo ponies and selling them all over the world at prices that would compete with the Argentine. Wasn't that it?"

"Nonsense! I've dropped all that sort of thing now. This is really serious. Between ourselves, Carminster, old man, I've got it jolly bad this time. Never had such an attack before; can't sleep, can't eat, can't do anything."

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"Doctor?" he said scathingly, "what should I want to see a doctor for?" Here he leant confidentially across the table, and, dropping his voice almost to a whisper, continued, "I give you my word, she's the prettiest girl in London, and I don't care where you look for the next!"

"Oh! that's it, is it?" remarked Carminster, trying to refrain from smiling; "I was afraid there was something wrong with your health."

At this juncture Mr. Carrington lost his temper

entirely, and said some disrespectful things about his health and several other matters, including the amount of sympathy shown him. He was an impulsive youth, and his numerous love affairs had had the effect of making his friends a trifle sceptical as to any future declarations of his affections. It is sad, yet it is nevertheless a fact that one can cry "Wolf" too often in the matrimonial sheep fold.

Their meal finished, they adjourned to the smoking-room, which by this time was well filled. If Carminster had overheard half the things that had been said about him before his entry, I doubt very much if he ever would have faced the crowd of backbiters who thronged the room. Among them were men who had sponged upon him in days gone by, men who had called themselves his best friends, who had partaken of his hospitality and boasted of their acquaintance with him, and who now trimmed their sails to the popular breeze, lest they might be supposed to be on friendly terms with one who was to all intents and purposes, for the time being at least, below the horizon.

While they were smoking and talking a servant entered and looked round the room. Then, espying Carminster in the corner, he came towards him with a note upon a salver. Carminster knew before he opened it from whom it came. It was

from Lord Derysforth, begging him not to leave Town until he communicated with him again. From certain hints, diplomatically thrown out, it appeared that the situation was even more serious than it had at first seemed. Reading between the lines it was easy to see what this meant.

Asking Carrington to excuse him for a few moments, he went to a writing table and scribbled a few lines to the effect that he placed himself entirely at his cousin's disposal, and that he would not leave London until he heard from him. He handed the note to the servant to be given to the messenger, and then returned to Bertie Carrington, who was doubtless devoting himself to the peculiar ethics of love with an enormous cigar in his mouth. The picture he presented was not altogether an edifying one.

"A penny for your thoughts, my dear fellow," said Carminster, as he seated himself beside the other.

"She's lovely, she's divine!" muttered Bertie. "I'm bowled over, lock, stock, and barrel. And to think that her old idiot of a father won't listen to reason. It's enough to make a man sick of his species."

"Perhaps it's the specie—or rather the lack of it

—that makes him so unreasonable," said Carminster, attempting a feeble joke.

" My dear fellow, he's literally rolling in wealth —fairly wallowing in money. He'd think as little of spending a hundred thousand as I should of buying a penny bunch of violets. However, I know I'm right as far as she's concerned, so I don't care a rap for him. He can go to the deuce."

" You're a cheerful young pirate, I must say. You're setting to work to deliberately rob this man of his daughter, and yet you complain because he is foolish enough to object. I expect you would do just the same if you were in a similar position."

Bertie's face was a picture of indignation.

" Confound you, Carminster," he said, " I thought you would sympathize. I tell you it is the most serious crisis of my life. I have made up my mind to marry that girl, and marry I will, come what may! Oh, I can see you're smiling. You think because I have flirted with other girls that I am not serious now——"

" My dear fellow, I never knew you when you were not serious. But, if you really mean it this time, I wish you luck, and, if I can help, you may count on me. Take my advice, don't show your cards too soon, or, as the Americans say, if the

father is anything of a poker player, he'll collar all the chips. Why, are you going?"

"Yes, she always walks in the park with one of her sisters between three and four when its fine."

They shook hands, and Carrington departed for the rendezvous, while Carminster made his way to the library to write a letter to his wife. In it he described his visit to the Foreign Office, and his cousin's request that he should not leave Town until he heard from him. Having posted it in the hall he returned once more to the smoking-room, which he found in a state of great excitement. The afternoon papers had come in with the news of the assassination of the King of Rubischeim, and needless to say everyone had some different opinion to offer concerning it. Some declared that it was the outcome of Russian intrigue; others asserted that Turkey was responsible; while one man, who appeared to be better informed than the rest, gave it as his opinion that it was the result of a conspiracy to dethrone the present monarch and to place his cousin Stefan in the seat of power. Carminster rang the bell and bade the servant who answered it procure for him the latest edition of the Pall Mall.

When the man returned with it he went back to

his seat in the corner of the room and sat down to carefully peruse the telegram in which the story of the outrage was set forth. It contained little more than he already knew. The King had left the palace and was in the act of driving out through the gates, where a large crowd was collected, when a man was observed to raise his arm and throw something immediately beneath the carriage. The result was a terrific explosion. One of the horses was killed, and the other had to be destroyed later. The coachman and footman were blown to fragments, as were His Majesty and the aide-de-camp seated beside him. Several of the bystanders received severe wounds, while such was the violence of the explosion that several of the windows of a tramcar passing at the moment were completely shattered. Many rumours, it appeared, were rife in the city as to the origin of the outrage, but it was generally believed that the Stefan party knew more of it than any others. The police were using all their endeavours at the time the telegram was despatched to trace the assassin, but so far they had been completely unsuccessful. It was rumoured that Prince Stefan was already in the city, and that important developments were hourly expected. From what the police could gather concerning the thrower of the bomb, he was

a man of middle age and was not of the artisan class. Having committed his act of destruction, he disappeared quietly from the crowd and was not seen again.

Carminster tossed the paper impatiently away from him. The description given of the man told him nothing. It might have answered for almost anyone.

Being tired of the club, he resolved to return to his hotel. He did so, after leaving his address with the hall porter in case his cousin should wish to communicate with him.

It was his custom, when alone, to instal himself at Watson's Hotel, Cork Street, Piccadilly. It was a quiet hostelry where they always did their utmost to make him comfortable. On his arrival there he found some luggage awaiting him from Kelston, for which after his sea voyage he was more than a little grateful. He was about to proceed to his room when the hall porter accosted him.

"There has been a lady here to see you twice this afternoon, m' lord," he said.

"A lady to see me," asked Carminster with some surprise, for he knew of no one who would be likely to call. "What was her name?"

"She wouldn't leave her name, m' lord. She said she wanted to see you for a few moments.

When I told her that you were not in, she said she would call again later in the afternoon."

"What was she like?"

"Well, m' lord, she was very tall, and, so far as I can remember, for I only saw her the first time, she had black hair. I think she was a foreign lady by the way she spoke. If she calls again, m' lord, shall I have her shown to your sitting-room?"

At first Carminster felt inclined to say "No," but eventually his curiosity and his good nature triumphed, and he said "Yes." Then he went upstairs, and seating himself before the fire in his sitting-room, he lit a cigarette. He had enough and to spare to think about, but for the time being he tried to put it aside. Though he would not admit it even to himself, his cold reception by his cousin and the still chillier one at the club had exercised a most depressing effect upon him, and, if it were like this in London, what would it be down in his own part of the world. His cigarette was almost finished, when there was a knock at the door, and a servant entered to inform him that the lady who had called twice that afternoon had come back again and would be glad to know if she might have an interview with him.

"Anything for a change of thought," said Carminster to himself, and then added aloud, "Show the lady up."

The man disappeared, and Carminster tossed what remained of his cigarette into the fire in anticipation of her coming. Presently there were footsteps in the corridor outside, and a few moments later the door opened, and a tall lady, dressed in deep mourning, and wearing a thick veil, advanced into the room. Carminster bowed and moved a chair forward for her to sit down.

"You are Lord Carminster, I presume," she said in French, as she seated herself.

"I am," the other replied in the same language. "May I ask in what way I can be of assistance to you?"

"I have come to speak to you on a matter the importance of which to me is one of life and death."

Carminster scarcely knew what answer to make to this remarkable speech. He began to think that his visitor was not altogether right in her head.

"I should be obliged," he said at last, "if you would tell me what you mean. I may then be able to tell you whether it is in my power or not to help you."

"I have not come here to ask your help, m' lord," she cried, with a stamp of her foot. "I am here for justice, and that justice I will have."

"Forgive me, but I am still at a loss to understand your meaning."

He was more than ever convinced that he was dealing with a lunatic. She had thrown back her veil by this time, and thus disclosed a face of singular beauty. Her olive coloured skin harmonized exactly with her raven black hair. There was, however, a wild look in her eyes that served to strengthen the impression she had first produced upon him.

"Perhaps you will allow me to ask your name?" he said. "At present I am ignorant of it."

"I am Gilbert Tremayne's widow," she answered. "I am the widow of the man who was done to death on your property, when he was your guest."

"Gilbert Tremayne's widow?" cried Carminster in complete astonishment, "I had no idea that he was married."

"Neither had the world," she replied bitterly. "We were married in the Teynkirche in Prague three years ago. Six months later he deserted me, but I never ceased to love him, and I think at the bottom of his heart there was always some love for me. Then he met you and your wife."

"I must ask you to be good enough to keep my wife's name out of the discussion."

"And why should I do that, seeing that she and she alone was responsible for his death! Had it not been for her he would not have——"

"Madame, once more I tell you that I will not permit my wife to be associated with the matter. Your husband was merely a chance acquaintance, whom we invited to visit us should he at any time happen to be in our neighbourhood. We had not the least idea we should see him so soon, or indeed that we should ever see him again. My astonishment was unbounded when I received his telegram to the effect that he was on his way to us."

"You ask me to believe that?"

"You may believe it or not, Madame, it is the truth!"

"And you had no idea why he came to you? Were you as blind then as in other matters?"

Here Carminster lost his temper completely.

"Once and for all, Madame," he said, "I beg to inform you that I will not listen to the insinuation you are throwing out. Be good enough to tell me your business and then leave me."

"You shall hear my business. I want to know who it was who killed my husband?"

"That is exactly what I want to know myself," he answered. "It is also what the police want to know."

"And yet you ran away from England to avoid the inquest?"

Carminster writhed on his chair.

"It would be useless for me to contradict you," he replied, "for you would not believe me."

"How can I when I know it to be a fact?"

Here Carminster determined to adopt other tactics. He rose from his chair and walked to the fire.

"It is very evident to me, Madame," he said, "that you and I are playing a game of cross purposes. You have derived the notion that I am in some way responsible for your husband's death. That I most emphatically deny. I believe, however, that we are on the verge of discovering the real criminal, and, should we do so, I doubt if anyone will be more surprised than yourself."

This time it was the turn of the lady to show signs of surprise.

"I do not understand you," she said. "If you did not kill him, who else would be likely to do so in such a place?"

By this time Carminster had quite recovered his equanimity.

"Would you have any objection to my asking you a few questions which, if you could answer them, would materially assist us in arriving at some understanding of this terrible matter.

"What are your questions?" she asked.

"Well, in the first place I should like to know whether you ever had reason to think that your husband was mixed up with any Secret Society?"

She paused before she replied, and the expression on her face gave him her answer before she had time to speak.

"Did you ever see him in company with any of the members of such a society?"

"Only once or twice."

"Can you give me any description of them?"

"The most constant visitor at our house was a man named Matheson."

"And his description?"

"He was tall, with a grey moustache and hair of the same colour. He possessed a great influence over my husband, but I don't see what this has to do with his murder."

"When I tell you that that man was seen by myself and other people on the day preceding the murder, within a few yards of the fatal spot, you may find occasion to change your mind."

He heard her catch her breath, and her face became deathly pale.

"Can you recall any other person with whom he was connected in this matter?"

"Yes, one other; a little old man with a wicked face, who came continually to see him for nearly a month, and whose visits then terminated altogether."

"Can you remember his name?"

"Perfectly," she answered. "His name was Stourdza."

This time it was Carminster's turn to show surprise.

"The puzzle is beginning to fit itself together," he said. "And I think, Madame, before very long, you will do me the justice to admit that you have wronged me."

"I trust I have not, m' lord," she answered. "I have no desire to do so. But I have come to England on purpose to try and solve the mystery connected with it."

"And we are doing the best on our side. I have my own good name to consider, and there are others who are equally interested. Should I find it necessary to communicate with you, to what address should I apply?"

She gave it to him, and then with a low bow left the room. She had not been gone more than a minute before a servant entered and handed him a note. It was from his cousin, Lord Derysforth, and ran as follows:—

DEAR RONALD,

Come to me here as soon as you can on receipt of this.

DERYSFORTH.

Evidently the case had entered upon a new phase.

CHAPTER XI

"I WONDER where all this is going to end," said Carminster to himself when Tremayne's fascinating but vindictive widow had departed. "Every hour seems to find the mystery deepening and the chance of solving it growing more and more remote. I never had the least idea that the fellow was a married man, nor did he ever allow us to suppose so. I wonder what on earth Derysforth can have to say to me. However, I suppose I had better go round and see him at once."

Once more he donned his hat and coat and went out into the now darkening street. Hailing a hansom he bade the man drive him as fast as possible to the Foreign Office. On making himself and his errand known to the officials there he was at once admitted to his cousin's presence. He found the latter busily engaged dictating letters, but as soon as he heard Carminster's name announced he rose from his chair and informed his secretary that he would ring for him when he wanted him.

"Well, Ronnie, old boy," he said, holding out his hand. "I suppose you were very much surprised at receiving my note asking you to come here again so soon."

"I was a little surprised, I must admit," Carminster replied. "But if you have any good news for me I don't mind if I come a hundred times."

"Well, I don't know whether you will consider it good news or bad," his cousin answered. "The fact of the matter is as soon as you left me this morning I despatched certain telegrams to the Continent, the answers to which have now come to hand. I cannot tell you how glad I am that we are beginning to come to some sort of an understanding of this mightily unpleasant affair, which, by the way, to my thinking promises to be an even larger business than we at first expected."

"Never mind that, so long as we can clear it up in the end," said Carminster. "I am not as a rule vindictive, but I confess to wanting to get even with those villains if there is any chance of doing so."

"To begin with, this man Stourdza is well known to the Continental police as an active Revolutionist, if he is not something worse. His first lieutenant, if I may so describe him, is a man named——"

"Matheson," Carminster put in.

"How did you know that?"

"I learnt it this afternoon from Tremayne's widow, who came to see me and accused me of murdering her husband. He is the same man whom I knew on board the yacht as Barraclough."

"Well, Stourdza, Matheson, and another man, whose identity has not yet been ascertained, arrived in the city at two o'clock on the morning of the day that the assassination of the King took place. It is believed that the third man was the actual thrower of the bomb, but, from what I can gather, this appears to be merely a matter of conjecture."

"Well? What next?"

"The rest is comparatively simple. Having committed their detestable crime they fled the city, and there is reason to believe that they are once more on their way to England. The authorities are keeping a sharp look out on all the boats that cross the Channel, but whether they will succeed in arresting them is quite another matter. Such astute rascals are not to be caught napping."

"If you know all this, for goodness sake explain how it was that my wife and I were drawn into the matter. We have never been mixed up with any Secret Society, so why should they have abducted us? And then again, why should they have murdered Tremayne, always supposing that they did so?"

"The only solution I can hit upon is that the murdered man must have belonged to their gang and have turned traitor in some way. To keep out of their way he went down to your place, and they have got the idea into their heads that he had gone to confide in you. In order that the events they were arranging should not be anticipated they got you out of the way, and, fearing that your wife might make trouble over your disappearance and thus draw suspicion upon them, they took her too. That is the only explanation I can give to it."

"And you say you believe they are returning to England?"

"The Continental police appear to think so. But of course they might be mistaken. However, England is the dumping ground of Europe's undesirables, so I have no doubt they will be here in due course."

"And what am I to do? You surely do not wish me to stay in Town for ever with that terrible suspicion hanging over me in the country?"

"Is it such a hardship to remain for a few days when it may have the effect of clearing you of any imputation that has been placed upon your honour? Telegraph to your wife to come up to you, and then go about as if nothing had happened. Elsie

and I will give a dinner in your honour, and you may be sure we will take care that everyone sees that we believe in you. Then, if these rascals do turn up, you will be at hand to identify them. You have written to the coroner, of course, explaining how it came about that you did not answer to the subpoena?"

"I am ashamed to say I have not," Carminster replied with evident contrition. "I should have done so I know, but I have been so worried all day that I have not had time to think of it."

"Then write to him to-night without fail. I don't want to have the ground cut from under your feet just at the very time that you can be most useful to us. You know almost as well as I do what the state of Europe is at the present moment. It only requires a small spark to make a very big blaze, and who can say that this business in Rubisheim may not be the match that will set it all afire. I sincerely hope not, for we have trouble enough on our hands as it is—at any rate we must be prepared for all eventualities."

"In that case I will telegraph to my wife at once and ask her to arrange to come up to-morrow morning."

"You could not do better, and should I hear anything in the meantime I will at once let you

know. Keep your eyes open while you're about Town, and should you see either of the gang, communicate with me without a moment's delay. The crest of the wave has not reached this country yet, but it has caused a prodigious sensation in Paris. The Quai d'Orsay will be only too thankful if they can manage to drag us into it in some way or another. Austria is holding aloof to see which way the other cats will jump; Germany is watchful and suspicious; and Russia, while probably being at the back of the whole business, is naturally anxious that it should not be known. Let there be but the smallest mistake, and I shall have the Opposition down on me like a hundred of bricks. Now you can understand how serious the matter is."

Carminster rose and bade him good-night, after which he made his way down to his cab once more, devoutly thanking his stars that, miserable as he was, he was not Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

Next morning Lady Carminster arrived in Town, and her husband was at the station to meet her. As she stepped from the railway station the latter thought he had never seen her look so lovely. Her furs suited her to perfection, and many were the glances thrown at her as she walked down the

platform by his side. Leaving the valet and maid to attend to the luggage, the master and mistress entered the brougham which was waiting for them outside and drove away.

"And how are affairs at home, dear?" Carmminster enquired, as they drove down the slope into the Waterloo Road. "I hope you found everything satisfactory?"

She did not reply at once. At last she said, "Yes, everything at home was satisfactory so far as household matters were concerned, but I cannot truthfully say that I was altogether happy. The fact that we were absent at the time of the inquest seems to have prejudiced many people against us, and although, of course, nothing was said to me on the subject, my instinct told me that they were quite prepared to believe the worst."

"The dear creatures," replied her husband with a short laugh; "what a charitable world it is to be sure. When they learn the truth they will be all eagerness to make amends to us, but until they do they are only too willing to believe all that is bad of us."

He then went on to tell her of his own doings since he had been in Town, of his visits to the Foreign Office and of the strange call he had received from Tremayne's widow.

"But I had no idea that Mr. Tremayne was married!" she said with some surprise. "He always pretended that he was a bachelor."

"That was Tremayne all over," replied Carminter. "I don't think he could tell the truth except by mistake. It appears that they had separated, but from the way she talked about him to me it is evident that she continued to love him, unworthy of her affection though he was."

He next told her of the suspicions that were entertained by the Foreign Minister concerning the assassination of the King of Rubischeim. On hearing this she uttered a little cry of horror.

"I knew there was something dreadful behind it all," she faltered, "but I never dreamt that it would be so terrible as this. Oh! Ronald, how thankful we ought to be that we have come out of it as safely as we have done. They might have murdered us so easily and no one would have been any the wiser."

"Yes, darling," he answered, "we ought indeed to be thankful, and I think we are. Nevertheless, I bear them no good will. What had that poor little puppet of a King done that they should take his life? If he had ever done harm to anyone, it was only to himself. Now there is every chance of serious European complications, and what the end of it will be who can say?"

The next two or three days were spent by Carminster and his wife in comparative quiet. Various old friends called upon them at their hotel, and Lady Carminster returned their visits in the orthodox way. They dined with Lord and Lady Derysforth in company with several other distinguished people, and the fact was duly chronicled in the morning papers. They were to be met with in the Park, in Bond Street, and at the theatres, and it was even rumoured that they intended opening Carminster House in Belgrave Square, which had been shut up for such a long time. At last Society, or at least a certain section of it, began to wonder whether or not it had made a mistake in being so quick to jump to a conclusion concerning the Tremayne affair. After all, it argued, many innocent people are wrongfully accused, and why should Carminster not be among the number? It was true the man was shot upon his property, and Rumour, that evil-tongued jade, had asserted that the friendship which existed between her ladyship and the dead man had been rather more than platonic. Yet—well, all things being taken into consideration, no one had any right to say that it was more than the merest flirtation, and should only be treated as such. One thing at least was certain, and that was the fact that the entertainments at Carminster House in

the old days had been famous in more ways than one, and if it were true that the present peer intended reviving them, why Rumour ought to be ashamed of herself for circulating reports that might tend to prevent honest people from enjoying such superlative hospitality as was likely to be offered to them. Needless to say, by the end of the week the past was forgotten, and Carminster was as popular as ever.

"I told you what it would be," remarked Master Bertie Carrington as they walked down Piccadilly together. "What cads they are. If you weren't Lord Carminster they wouldn't believe in you till the end of time, but because you can give them what they want, they're willing to go down on their bended knees and lick your boots. It makes one sick of his kind."

"Oh! they're not all like that," Carminster replied. "I have had several loyal friends who have believed in me through everything. There are bound to be black sheep in every flock, and I cannot expect that mine should be an exception to the rule. By the way, how is your little affair progressing?"

"It isn't progressing at all, it's going backwards," answered the young man with what was intended to be a look of anguish upon his face. "There's a beast of a brewer knight hanging about

the premises continually, and her father seems to have taken a tremendous fancy to him. They say he has thirty thousand a year, so it seems to me I stand a very poor chance with my beggarly five hundred."

"But if she really loves you——"

"Yes, of course, I know all about that. I believe she loves me, but what is love against thirty thousand a year, a Town house, a shooting box in the Highlands, a steam yacht, and diamonds—especially the diamonds." The poor youth groaned in bitterness of spirit.

"Come, come, cheer up," said Carminster, as if he had no troubles of his own. "If she cares for you, she'll send the other fellow to the right-about without considering—Hullo! Hi! Cabby!"

The cabman stopped, and without a word of explanation to his astounded companion, Carminster jumped into the vehicle and bade the driver go on. Pushing up the shutter, he said, "Do you see that hansom in front with the grey horse? You do? Very well, then, keep it in sight, but don't let them suspect that you are following it."

"Well, I'll be hanged," said Master Bertie, "It's my belief he's off his head. That's what's the matter with him!"

Meanwhile Carminster was rattling down the

street in pursuit of the vehicle which he had pointed out to his driver. To say that he was in a state of excitement would not be to describe his condition at all. This will be the more readily understood when I say that the man he had seen enter the cab before him was the individual known as Matheson or Barraclough. That he was not mistaken he was positively certain, and now he was determined to find out all he possibly could about that gentleman's movements. They crossed Piccadilly Circus into Shaftesbury Avenue, thence across High Holborn and into the Grays Inn Road.

"Where on earth is he heading for?" Carminster asked himself, but the answer soon suggested itself. "He's going to King's Cross Station," and this, it turned out, was his destination.

He saw Barraclough, for it seems easier to call him by that name, alight from his cab, and since he did not pay him it was evident that he wished the man to wait. When he had passed into the station Carminster followed his example, taking care to keep some distance behind him in order that the other might not become aware that he was being followed. Without hesitation he made his way to the Main Arrival Platform, where, after questioning a porter, he began to pace up and

down while awaiting the appearance of the train. Carminster purchased an evening paper, and seating himself on a bench, held it up to screen his face, taking care every now and again to make sure that his man was still there. The minutes went by, and presently a bustle on the platform gave evidence that the expected train was approaching. He turned up his fur collar round his ears to hide as much of his face as possible, and waited to see who it was Barraclough had come to meet. The express entered the station, and with a clattering of brakes and a vast expenditure of steam came to a standstill. It was easy enough to follow Barraclough's tall figure as it moved in and out among the crowd. So far he had evidently not found the person he had come to meet. But the quickening of his pace a few seconds later proclaimed the fact that he had at last discovered him. Carminster saw him stop, but who it was he spoke to he was as yet unable to tell. Presently, however, he saw that he had turned and was coming down the platform once more, accompanied by a broad-shouldered, thick-set man of perhaps forty years of age. He had the appearance of an Englishman, and was well, but not stylishly, dressed. As good fortune had it at the moment that they passed Carminster

Barracough's attention was diverted by a porter with a barrow of luggage, so that he did not become aware of his presence. The latter allowed them to reach the great doors before he again took up the pursuit. When he reached the portico he was just in time to see them take their places in the hansom, which immediately drove off. Without the loss of a moment Carminster called up his man and sprang in.

"Don't let that cab escape you," he cried, "and it will be a sovereign in your pocket."

"Leave it to me, guv'nor," said his Jehu. "I'll follow him if it's up to the top of the Moniment." And the second cab followed the first.

This time the route was a different one. Leaving the station they passed along the Pentonville Road and City Road until they reached Finsbury Pavement, whence they turned into a side street. It was quite dark by this time, and a thick drizzle was falling, making it difficult to distinguish objects at any great distance ahead. As a matter of fact he had lost sight of their quarry, and he began to fear that his cabby had done the same, but he should have been more familiar with the astuteness of the London hackman. Evidently the cab in front had stopped, for his own horse was pulled up so sharply that the jerk almost precipitated him from his seat.

"Quick, sir!" said the cabby through the shutter in the roof. "They've gone down that there alley to the right."

The words had scarcely left his lips before Carminster was on the pavement and entering the dark lane the other had indicated. It was paved with cobble stones and lighted by a solitary lamp at the further end. As he advanced he looked about him, but could see no sign of the two men he was in search of. It was as if they had vanished into thin air. He looked up and down and scanned the various doorways, but without success. Having convinced himself that nothing was to be gained by remaining there, he left the alley-way and proceeded into the street once more. The cab they had employed had departed, and from this he drew the natural inference that they intended remaining where they were. Before entering his cab again he took careful stock of the place in order that he might be sure to know it again. They could not have passed out at the other end, for the reason that the alley was a cul-de-sac, and he noticed that the door of the house which he believed them to have entered was situated at the back of a chemist's shop, the proprietor of which was without a doubt a foreigner, since his name was Struckmeyer. The next shop further up was a pastrycook's and the next a greengrocer's. Having

noticed these facts he jumped into his cab and bade the man drive him to the nearest telephone office. Unfortunately, the box was engaged, but as soon as the occupant emerged he entered and rang up the Foreign Office. Much to his satisfaction he learnt that his cousin was still there.

"Be good enough to tell his lordship," he said, "that Lord Carminster is on his way to see him on important business, and that he will be with him as soon as possible."

Then once more entering his cab he set off for Downing Street.

"Well, Ronald," said his cousin, "what is it? I can see from your face that you have made a discovery of some importance. You don't mean to tell me that you have seen any of those rascals?"

"That is exactly what I *do* mean," Carminster answered, and forthwith furnished him with an account of his adventures that afternoon.

"You are quite sure that it was this man Matheson, Barracough, or whatever he calls himself, that you saw? It would not do for us to make a mistake in this matter."

"I am as sure of it as that I am standing before you now," Carminster replied. "I had ample leisure to watch him, and I made good use of it."

"And the man with him?"

"Is short, thick-set, with a clean shaven face and large ears. He limps a little in his walk."

"And you would know the side street again?"

"I believe I could almost find my way to it blindfold."

"This matter must be looked into at once. I cannot understand how the man managed to get into England without being discovered by the police. They have been instructed to watch all the ports."

"Well, the fact remains that he is here, and if he is, the odds are very short that his companions are here also. I shall communicate with Scotland Yard at once and put them on the alert. Are you very busy for half an hour?"

"I have nothing whatsoever to do save to go to my hotel and to dress for dinner."

"In that case I will send a messenger to Scotland Yard at once to ask Inspector Dunsford to come and see me. A few moments' conversation with you ought to put him in possession of all the facts, and, after that, we can leave the matter safely in his hands."

So saying, Lord Derysforth went to his writing table and wrote a note. This finished, he handed it to a clerk with instructions that it was to be taken at once to Scotland Yard. The man departed,

and the two cousins sat down before the fire to await the famous police officer's arrival.

"How are matters progressing in Rubisheim?" Carminster enquired. "It is so difficult to gather the truth from the newspapers. They all seem to contradict one another."

"Well, for the time being," answered the Foreign Minister, "they are comparatively quiet, with the exception of a few demonstrations and minor riots. Prince Stefan is laying himself out to win as much popularity as he can, and the three Powers principally interested are endeavouring to appear as if they were not concerned in the matter at all. One piece of news, however, may interest you. I intended telling you before, but in listening to your story I forgot it. When did you last see Tremayne upon the Continent?"

"On October the 17th in Paris," Carminster replied. "He was just starting for Monte Carlo."

"Well, he didn't go there. He went to Petersburg instead, and your amiable little friend Stourdza accompanied him. What they did there we can only conjecture, but if you ask me in my private capacity I should say it had something to do with that detestable affair in Rubisheim. They separated in Prague, and Tremayne came hot foot to England. He only remained in London one

night, and then went down into the country to you. The rest is history."

At that moment the same clerk entered and informed his lordship in a low voice that Inspector Dunsford had arrived.

"Then show him up! Now, Ronald, we shall learn what he thinks of the matter."

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CHAPTER XII

JUDGING from his appearance, Inspector Dunsford might have been anything from a respectable draper in a good way of business to a country solicitor. He had a clear-cut, not unhandsome face, set off with a pair of neatly trimmed, iron-grey whiskers; moustache or beard he wore none. When he spoke it was quietly and with deliberation as if he were desirous that not a word should be liable to misconstruction. He was neat in his dress almost to the verge of eccentricity. His silk hat shone like a looking-glass, while his boots might have been moulded to his feet. And this was the man who in all probability knew more than any other man living about the doings of the Anarchists, Regicides, and Desperadoes generally of Europe. He it was who, to all intents and purposes, saved the life of one of the greatest crowned heads of the world on the day preceding the Jubilee of '87. But for his skill and cunning on that occasion the latter would have walked blindly into the trap which had been so artfully

laid for him, and the great day of rejoicing would have been turned into one of mourning. The magnificent repeater watch which he carries to this day in his waistcoat pocket is a small memento of his illustrious patron's gratitude. He it was, to quote another instance of his cleverness, who caught and brought to justice the infamous murderer of one of the noblest statesmen the world has ever seen, and who, on another occasion—but there, to attempt to put on record all that he has done in that line of business would require more space than I am at liberty to give to it. It is sufficient for our purpose that he had arrived at the Foreign Office in response to the message Lord Derysforth had despatched to him.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Inspector," said the Cabinet Minister, getting out of his chair to shake hands with him. "I am glad my messenger managed to find you in. Won't you sit down? I have something of the greatest importance to consult you about. However, before I begin, let me tell you that this is my cousin, Lord Carminster, whose name you have, of course, heard in connection with the Tremayne murder. He has been through a series of extraordinary adventures lately, and to-day they seem happily to have reached a climax. But before we go any further,

perhaps it would be as well if he told you his story himself. Go on, Ronald, you can tell it better than I."

Thus adjured Carminster set to work and gave the officer a detailed account of all his doings from the moment of Tremayne's arrival until he entered the room where they were now seated. The inspector listened without an expression upon his face. For all the attention he was apparently paying to it his thoughts might have been a hundred miles away. It was only when the other had finished that he seemed to wake up to the realities of the moment. Then he crossed his legs and sat gazing into the fire, while a man might have counted fifty slowly. The other two did not break into his reverie.

Presently he turned abruptly on Carminster.

"I understand, my lord, that you saw this man Matheson, alias Barraclough, standing in the doorway of the "Rose and Crown" Hotel in Kelston when you were driving in to the station to meet Mr. Tremayne on the day before the murder?"

"I saw him distinctly," the other replied. "He was smoking a cigar, and now I come to think of it old Farmer Griffin of the Rood Farm can corroborate what I say, for I noticed that he ran

against him as he came out of the hotel and apologized for doing so."

"Was he there when you returned from the station with your guest?"

"No! But wait one moment; now I come to think of it we passed him further down the High Street walking with a man—good heavens! what an idiot I am not to have thought of that before—walking with a short man who limped a little."

"Exactly what I expected! The man he went to meet at King's Cross this afternoon. Now I am beginning to understand matters. Mr. Tremayne did not leave your house, I presume, on the night of his arrival?"

"No! I can swear positively that he did not. In point of fact I am as sure as I can be of anything that he did not cross the threshold until we went shooting on the morning following his arrival."

"Did he seem nervous or ill at ease?"

"Not so far as I could tell. He struck me as being in unusually good spirits. On the Continent we had more than once found him morose and apt to take offence at trifles, but on this occasion he was quite himself."

"I see from the police report that his money, his watch and chain, and a valuable ring were still

upon the body when it was found, also a leather wallet containing some bank-notes and a few private letters of no importance. Nothing was found in his room at your house that could throw any light on the subject, I suppose?"

"Nothing so far as I know. The police, however, could probably tell you that better than I can, for I did not search his effects."

"Of course not, my lord; but I thought that possibly you might have heard something."

"Not a word. You see, on the day of the discovery of the body I was kept hard at work, and in the evening I was kidnapped and carried on board the yacht, so that I had no opportunity of learning anything that went on at Carminster."

The great detective sat silent for upwards of a minute. It was evident that he was working out some problem in his head.

"If we could only answer two questions, the rest would be comparatively easy," he said at last.

"And what are those questions?" asked Lord Derysforth.

"The first is why did he go down to Carminster Park at all, and the second, how was it that the others were aware of his intention to do so, and yet did not stop him before he could put his plan into execution? That those two men were there before

him, and without doubt were awaiting his arrival, proves conclusively that they knew what was in his mind, and also that they were there to circumvent him. So far so good; but if he kept his secret to himself, as he would most certainly do, knowing that in all human probability his life depended on it, how had they become aware of it? Then again, what was the secret that he was guarding so jealously, and how did he hope to benefit himself by coming to you?"

"Might he not have been anxious to keep out of the way for a while; that is to say, not to push himself forward until the time was ripe to put into practice the scheme he had already arranged?"

"No, with due respect to you, my lord, I don't think that was the reason. We must go deeper still."

"Would it have anything to do with his visit to Petersburg in company with that notorious rascal Stourdza, do you think?" asked Lord Derysforth.

"That was what I had in my mind," was the other's reply. "I have also another theory, and that is that it was not so much Lord Carminster as yourself that he was aiming at."

Derysforth uttered an exclamation of astonishment. He had not bargained for this.

"Why on earth, Dunsford, should he wish to draw me into the matter?" he asked, with just a tone of asperity in his voice. "I have never seen the man, and beyond what I have learnt lately I know nothing at all of the fellow."

"Forgive me, my lord," replied the detective, "but you seem to forget that from his point of view you were the most important personage in the country. In other words, you are Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs."

"Well, and if I am, what then? For the life of me I don't see why his visit to Carminster Park should have anything to do with me. Be more explicit, my dear Dunsford."

"I will try to be, your lordship," answered the other. "To begin with, Lord Carminster is your cousin. Is it not feasible that through him he might hope to obtain a confidential interview with you. In other words he had a secret of vast importance to dispose of."

"But we don't purchase information of that description," said Derysforth. "He must surely have known that!"

"To that, of course, I can offer no reply, as of course I do not know what his intentions really were; at any rate I only put the theory forward for what it is worth. Later on we shall probably see things more clearly, and then doubtless you will

find that I am not so very far wrong from the mark in my conjecture."

"And now what do you propose doing?"

"Well, in the first place I shall dispatch a man to Kelston with instructions to find out all he can concerning the two men who were seen there. While that is being done I shall have a close watch kept on the house where Lord Carminster believes that the men are hiding. All their movements will be watched, and as soon as the Continental police arrive we shall be prepared to take action."

"And when will that be?"

"The day after to-morrow at latest. They could scarcely get here before."

Lord Derysforth scratched his chin reflectively.

"I need not remind you," he said, "that there is no time to be wasted. The matter is a most delicate one from whichever point you view it, and I have no wish that the country should be drawn into a European squabble. Your tact, my dear Dunsford, can be safely relied upon, I know; but there is always the chance of mistakes happening, and that is exactly what I am anxious to prevent. We don't want the Continental police to score over us."

"They won't do that, my lord," replied the inspector; "at any rate, not if I can help it. And now, if you have no further use for me, I will return

to the Yard and dispatch a man to make enquiries at Kelston. As you say we must not lose any more time than we can help. If we can make sure that the couple were there—one, of course, we know was there—well, the rest should be easy. Even if he didn't stay at the same hotel he must have slept somewhere, and it must be our business to find out where that somewhere was."

"But why on earth should there have been two men?" asked the Cabinet Minister.

Inspector Dunsford laughed genially.

"One to watch the other," he replied. "In such matters as this trust is very seldom shown. And now, m' lords, I will wish you good evening."

"You will let me know directly you have any information to impart, Dunsford?"

"Your lordship may be sure I will do so," answered the other. "But I do not expect to hear much to-night."

He picked up his hat and with a bow made for the door.

"That's a clever man," observed Derysforth, when the other had departed. "It will be a strange thing indeed if these rascals manage to elude him. One thing, at any rate, is quite certain, and that is the fact that if he does not bring the Rubischeim affair home to them he has at least cleared you

of any suspicion of being connected with the Tremayne murder. If he can but establish the fact that the second man was present in Kelston the whole thing is as clear as daylight."

"That's all very well, my dear Derysforth," exclaimed Carminster, "but when you come to look into it, I cannot see for the life of me that the man has done anything to help me. He was not aware that either of them were in Kelston until I told him. I will admit that he has propounded an ingenious theory to account for the murder, but why did he not do so before? Answer me that! Had it not been for me neither he nor you would have known anything about these men, and yet you talk as if Dunsford had worked miracles. It only goes to prove how far the word 'detective' goes to satisfy the British public!"

Lord Derysforth could not refrain from laughing.

"Go along home, you old idiot, and get into a better temper. The Englishman who doesn't believe in the superlative cleverness of Scotland Yard is no longer fit to share the glories of the Empire. I'll see that any message which may arrive from Dunsford is at once sent on to you for your information."

"You know how anxious I am, and so is Alice. She can think of nothing else."

"You must try and cheer her up. Don't let her brood over it. In a few days, all being well, you will be out of the wood, and then you can shout to your heart's content. No one will be more delighted than I shall be."

"God bless you! Forgive my ill-humour, but my nerves are all on the rack to-night. Perhaps to-morrow we shall have news that will put them right again."

"Let us hope we shall. Good-night, Ronald. I think this affair has pulled us closer than we have ever been before. I hope it may continue."

A silent shake of the hand was the other's only reply. As he had told his kinsman, he was worked up to a pitch that, improperly directed, might have had grievous consequences. Those who had known the reserved, standoffish Lord Carminster of the Continent, would have found some difficulty in recognizing the man who now moved towards the door of the Foreign Minister's private office.

"Good-night, old boy," he said. "If all goes as it should I shall expect to hear from you in the morning."

From Downing Street Carminster drove direct to his hotel. It seemed like years since he had left it.

"Is Lady Carminster at home?" he enquired of the hall porter.

"Yes, m' lord, she returned about an hour ago. She asked if your lordship had come back, and I told her 'No.' "

"Quite right! I was detained."

He went upstairs and entered the drawing-room of the suite he had engaged. There he found his wife seated before the fire, looking into it as if she were attempting to read the future in the burning coals. On hearing her husband enter the room she looked round and then rose to greet him.

"Oh! I have been so lonely without you," she said, with her arms round his neck. "You seem to have been away for an eternity."

"I have had a long and trying day," he answered, and then led her back to her chair before the fire.

"Tell me all about it," she said, "and when you have finished I will give you my news."

He thereupon set to work and told her of his meeting with Barracough, his following him to King's Cross, and his subsequent interview with his cousin and Dunsford at the Foreign Office.

"And now what have you to tell me, little woman?" he enquired. "I hope you have not been worried."

"If you want me to tell you the plain truth, I must confess I have been rather upset," she answered, holding up her fan to keep the heat of

the fire from her face. "It was about three o'clock this afternoon when one of the servants came to tell me that a lady wished to speak to me."

"Mrs. Tremayne, I'll be bound," said Carminster. "Tall, dark, handsome, and with a curious trick of raising her eyebrows?"

"Yes, it was Madame Tremayne. And she said the most awful things. If ever there was a fiend it must have been that man. He deserted her within six weeks of their wedding day, and left her to starve. She followed him and implored him to return to her. In reply he struck her, and she carries the mark of his blow to this day. And yet, can you believe it, the woman loves him still?"

"But what brought her to you?"

"Because she had got it into her head that she had done you an injustice, and she wanted to make every reparation in her power. Do you remember that little man whom you told me came on board the yacht in the middle of the night?"

"Stourdza?"

"Yes! Well, he is in London. He arrived yesterday."

Carminster sprang to his feet.

"Stourdza in London?" he cried. "Dunsford must know this at once. There is not a moment to lose. Did she know, by any chance, where he is staying?"

"She could not tell me that. All she knew was that he was in London."

Carminster went to a writing table and wrote a note to Dunsford to tell him the news. When a messenger had been despatched with it he returned to his wife.

"Please God, dear," he said, "the next few days will put everything right. The police are practically certain to lay these rascals by the heels and at the same time to clear me of any suspicion Tremayne's death may have cast upon me. Now I must go and dress for dinner. You still adhere to your wish for a quiet evening at home?"

"I should prefer it unless you wish to go out, dear," was his wife's reply.

"No! I can most solemnly promise you I don't want to do that," he answered. "I have had enough of Town to-day to last me for a long time. Oh! how thankful I shall be to get back to Carminster. The very thought of that dear old house is like a glimpse of Heaven."

She patted the arm that rested upon the arm of his chair.

"It won't be long now, dear," she said. "I feel sure we are nearly at the end of our troubles. And then we shall appreciate our home all the more for having been kept away from it so long."

Carminster bent over her chair and kissed her

and then went off to dress. He was in better spirits than he had been for a long time, for as he had told his wife, he firmly believed they were nearing the end of their troubles.

They had dined, and Carminster had finished his second cigarette, when a servant entered with a note upon a salver. The writing on the envelope was not familiar to him, but his instinct told him whence it came. He opened it and read as follows :—

To LORD CARMINSTER,
Watson's Hotel,
Cork Street.

My LORD,

Information has just reached me that the man Stourdza is in London. We intend, if possible, to effect his capture to-night. Deeming it possible that you might like to be present, I write to inform you that we shall meet in Room 22, Dickson's Buildings, Finsbury Circus, at nine o'clock this evening, and afterwards proceed to the place you know of. Might I ask you, if you intend being present, to be as punctual as possible.

Your obedient servant,
J. F. DUNSFORD, Inspector.

"Surely, Ronald, you won't go?" said his wife anxiously. "You don't know what might happen."

"Yes, dear, I must go," he replied. "I shall not rest content until these men are safely under lock and key. I'm sorry that I have to leave you alone again, but let us hope it will be the last time. Do not be afraid; dear, I will make it all up to you later on. You shall have no cause to complain of my leaving you then."

"Go then, dear," she answered, "but do, for my sake, take care of yourself. I shall be in a fever of anxiety until you return. What time do you think you will be back?"

"It is impossible for me to say," he replied. "It all depends upon circumstances. The men may not be at home, in which case we shall have to wait for them. At any rate you may rest assured I shall come back to you as soon as possible."

Ten minutes later he had changed his clothes, and was stepping into a hansom which was to convey him to the rendezvous. It was a miserable night. A thick sleet was falling, and London looked as only London can look under such depressing conditions. Carminster, however, paid no attention to such minor matters; he was thinking of what lay before him. It was evident that

Dunsford was wide awake, and that he was also cognisant of the gravity of the situation. If he were determined to arrest Stourdza, it could only mean that he had sufficient information to act upon to warrant his taking such a decisive step.

Through muddy street after muddy street the cab trundled its way until the West End was left far behind, and the dingy neighbourhood of Finsbury Circus was reached. At the beginning of the Pavement Carminster stopped the cab and alighted. Having paid his fare he enquired of the driver whether he could tell him where Dickson's Buildings were situated. The man, however, did not know, so when he had seen him depart he was compelled to make enquiries of a policeman.

"Dickson's Buildings?" said the constable after a moment's thought. "Down that street there, first turning to the right, red lamp over the door."

Carminster thanked him and set off in search of the place in question. It proved to be a tall, gaunt building of the up-to-date lodging house type. The front door was in a side street, and, as the policeman had said, there was a red lamp over the door. As there was no one about to prevent him he entered and looked about him. He was standing in a chilly stone hall, from which rose a precipitous staircase, the ascent of which could be traced flight by flight until it reached the

topmost storey. Having noted the numbers on the ground floor he commenced to ascend the stairs. The first floor ended with number 16. He therefore climbed higher until he discovered number 22. The voice of a man singing a German drinking song came to him from the end of the passage, and mingled somewhat incongruously with the sound of a child's crying on the floor above. He approached the door and turned the handle. When he entered the room he found it empty, but this did not disappoint him, for he knew that he was some minutes before his time. It would not be long, he felt sure, before Dunsford would put in an appearance.

The room in which he found himself was almost devoid of furniture. It contained a rough deal table, two windsor chairs, and a small cupboard, evidently intended for storing pots and pans. As if in anticipation of someone's arrival, a small gas jet was burning, but there was no fire in the grate.

While waiting for Dunsford's arrival he seated himself on the table and fell to considering the various events of the day. He derived a peculiar satisfaction from the thought that he was about to get even with his enemies after all. They had used him shamefully, and it was only in the common fairness of things that they should suffer in return.

Then the sound of footsteps on the stone stairs

reached his ears, and presently they came along the corridor towards the room in which he was waiting.

"Dunsford at last," he said to himself.

There was a knock on the door. "Come in!" he cried, and two tall, burly men entered.

"Police officers," thought Carminster, and added aloud, "Has Inspector Dunsford arrived?"

"He'll be here directly, m' lord," observed the taller of the two men. "He was kept for a few minutes waiting for a telegram."

The second man had moved behind Carminster to the window, where he stood looking out upon the neighbouring chimney-pots.

"Perhaps your lordship would like to see the latest news we have received," said the man who had previously spoken, producing a telegram from his pocket.

"Of course I should," replied the other, and taking the message from him commenced to read it.

He had scarcely reached the end of the first line before a noose was slipped over his head by the man behind, while his companion seized his legs and strapped them together. His hands were tied behind his back and a gag was placed in his mouth.

"He won't make much trouble now," said the taller of the men, as they placed him on the

floor. "Good-night, my lord, and may you have pleasant dreams."

Then they went out, locking the door behind them. Carminster listened to them as they went downstairs, and his heart sank like lead within him.

CHAPTER XIII

How long Carminster remained in the curious position in which we left him in the preceding chapter it is impossible to say. All he remembers is being tied up, and spending all his strength endeavouring to rid himself of his bonds. He had, however, been manipulated by men who were masters of their craft, and do what he would he could not free himself. Worse than that, every effort he made increased his weakness, and in consequence left him less capable of resistance. The most galling part of it all, however, was the knowledge that he had been trapped. He had flattered himself that he had outwitted his enemies, and as it turned out they had outwitted him. Struggle as he would he could not release himself from his bonds. At last, thoroughly worn out, he lost consciousness, and remembers nothing further of what happened. The rope that bound his wrists had cut into his skin, while the gag which had been forced into his mouth had well nigh choked him. Worse than all, he had the unenviable knowledge that

while he was lying powerless in that wretched little room the men he was so anxious to capture were in all probability making their escape from England. Small wonder, therefore, that he felt as if there was no further happiness left in life for him.

What the time was he had no idea. He might have been unconscious for hours or for only a few minutes for all he could tell the difference. The gas was still burning, but though he listened he could not hear anyone moving about the house. Once more he commenced to struggle with his bonds, but the attempt was useless. Try how he would he could not free himself. His arms had lost all sense of feeling, and as for his legs he could not bend them, however much he might try to do so. When he thought of the easy way in which he had been caught he ground his teeth with impotent rage. That he, a man who prided himself on his knowledge of human nature should have been so easily taken in was as galling as it was humiliating. Another hour, or what he judged to be an hour, went by, and still he lay where they had placed him. He tried to ease himself by rolling over on to his side, but in vain. The agony was as intense as before. It was plain that there was nothing for it but to wait and hope for release. But would it ever come? He could picture his

wife's anxiety when he did not return. She would be waiting, waiting, waiting, and imagining all sorts of horrors. He was still thinking of this when a clock somewhere in the neighbourhood sounded midnight. As the last strokes died away a man stumbled up the stairs singing a music-hall ditty. He entered a room on the same floor, slamming the door behind him. Then all was still once more. Upwards of half an hour must have elapsed before any other sound of importance reached him. Then there were voices on the stairs and the confused trampling of feet. A moment later a voice he recognized cried, "What did you say the number was? Twenty-two? Very well, here you are!"

The handle of the door was turned, but the door itself proved to be locked. "Break it in!" said someone, and the suggestion was immediately followed by a crash.

At first, and for the reason that it was hidden by a table, they did not see the prostrate figure on the floor. But a second glance round the apartment discovered it.

"Heaven be thanked, we've found you at last, old man," cried Bertie Carrington, for it was he who was at the head of the rescue party. "We've been looking for you everywhere. A nice old time

you've given us. Come along, boys, lift him up on the table while we undo these ropes."

In almost less time than it takes to tell his bonds were cast off, and when a stiff glass of brandy and water, which the foresight of the ever-thoughtful Mr. Carrington had provided, had been administered, Carminster was in a position to tell his tale. The young men listened to him in complete astonishment. It was the first time they had ever been brought in contact with this particular seamy side of life.

"But how did you come to hear of it?" enquired Carminster at last, for that was what had been puzzling him ever since he realized who his rescuers were.

"Well," said Bertie, "it was this way. After dinner I went round to your hotel to have a talk with you. I was in a bit of trouble about a certain matter that you know of, and I wanted your advice. Lady Carminster told me that you had gone out, but she did not think you would be very long. So I waited. When it got to eleven o'clock I could see that she was growing nervous, so I asked if there was anything I could do. She then showed me the letter you had received from Inspector Dunsford making an appointment for nine o'clock in this house. Something, I don't know what it was, made me suspicious, and when I left her I got

two or three of the boys to come with me, and we set off to the rescue. And, upon my word, I think it was just as well that we did, for tied up as you were and with that thing in your mouth, I don't believe you'd have been alive in the morning. You were almost black in the face when we found you. How do you feel now?"

"As right as a trivet," Carminster replied, though his looks belied his words. "But I want to be even with those rascals who enticed me here and tied me up. Have you seen or heard anything of Dunsford?"

"Not a word," Carrington replied. "I shouldn't know the gentleman if I saw him. Have another glass of brandy, old chap, and then I'll escort you home. It won't do you any harm, and, by Jove, you look as if you want it."

Carminster did as he was ordered, and had to confess that he felt all the better for it. Then the party left the house and proceeded in the direction of Finsbury Pavement, where cabs even at that hour were obtainable. Before he entered his, Carminster shook hands warmly with the young men who had accompanied Bertie Carrington and assisted at his rescue. At the same time he was conscious of the glaring absurdity of the whole business. That he, a man of the world, who had hitherto prided himself on being able to take care

of himself in all sorts of company, should have been caught by such a simple trick, was by no means flattering to his self-esteem. And not the least pleasant part of it all was the knowledge that it was not the first time he had been trapped by the same people. However, he was determined that he would be even with them before he was done.

When he and Bertie Carrington were seated in the cab he spoke his mind freely and to the point. This matter, he declared, was getting past endurance. He had been unjustly suspected of a crime which he had never committed. He and his wife had been kidnapped and carried away to sea, and now he had been lured to a house and bound and gagged while doubtless the men who should have been prisoners long since were making their escape from the country.

"I'll tell you what we'll do, Bertie," he said at last. "We'll drive to Scotland Yard and find out whether we can see Dunsford. If the story I have got to tell him does not put him on his mettle, nothing else will."

"That's the idea," replied Master Bertie with conviction. "We'll go to Scotland Yard!" and putting his hand up to the shutter in the roof of the cab he gave the necessary order to the driver.

On arrival at their destination they discovered that the inspector was not in. He had gone out

an hour or so before, but had left word that he should return before very long. As it turned out, they were not destined to wait as long as they expected, for while they were talking to the officer in charge the inspector entered the office. That he was excited it needed but one glance at his face to tell. When he saw Carminster he made no effort to conceal his surprise.

"Why, my lord," he said, "I didn't expect to find you here at this time of night. I hope there's nothing wrong?"

"There's something very much wrong," Carminster replied. "Take me somewhere where I can talk to you alone."

The inspector glanced sharply at him, as if he did not know quite what to make of his lordship's manner. Then he led the way to another room. There Carminster told his story, not a little to Dunsford's astonishment and consternation.

"The truth of the matter is, Inspector," he said, "while you have been waiting for the foreign police to come over, these men had been laying their plans to outwit you. In some way or another they must have become aware that I had discovered their hiding place, and have taken steps to keep me out of the way."

"But, my lord, I have had the house most carefully watched. They cannot have come out without my knowing it."

"Then pray tell me who it was who forged your name to that note?" Here he threw the letter in question on the table. "Who was it enticed me to Dickson's Buildings and tied me up?"

Inspector Dunsford found himself unable to offer any satisfactory explanation.

"Now what do you propose doing?" continued Carminster remorselessly. "If they have not gone already, they'll be out of England before morning—just as they came into it without your people becoming aware of the fact."

This thrust evidently went home, and as Carminster had hoped, it served to put the officer on his mettle.

"I shall arrest them to-night," he said emphatically. "We've got four charges to go upon. Suspicion of being concerned in the murder of Gilbert Tremayne, also being party to the assassination of the King of Rubisheim, the kidnapping of yourself and wife, and the assault on you to-night. Will your lordship and your friend accompany us?"

Carminster had only to glance at Bertie's face to see how his fancy lay.

"I'm your man," said that cheerful youth, who, by the way, was thoroughly enjoying himself. "Let us go by all means. If we can catch them so much the better. But look here, old fellow, if

I were you I should send a message to your wife to put a stop to her anxiety. Surely the inspector can arrange that it shall be delivered. I give you my word she's nearly beside herself with fright about you."

"With the greatest pleasure in the world," replied Dunsford. "If you will write a note, my lord, I will send a man with it at once. But we must not lose any time."

Carminster, by way of reply, sat down and wrote a short note to his wife, in which he assured her that all was well with him, but that he was engaged upon important business connected with the matter they both had so much at heart, and that he was not certain when he should reach home. Having sealed the envelope he handed it to the inspector, who left the room to despatch a messenger with it. A few minutes later he returned and announced that he was ready for business. Three sedate-looking men of middle age, who might very well have passed for Wesleyan Ministers, followed them.

To this day Carminster tells me that he can recall that moment, the thin drizzle, the slush upon the pavements and the inquisitive look of the passers-by as they watched them get into the different cabs.

"You ought not to be here, Bertie," said Carminster as they drove along the Embankment.

"My dear old fellow," replied Bertie, "do you imagine for one moment that after all you have been through to-night I intend letting you go into this on your own. If so, you don't know me! Why, I should never be able to look Lady Carminster in the face again. No! we're going to settle matters once and for all for you; what say you, Mr. Dunsford?"

"I sincerely hope so," said that officer, who was still feeling a little sore on account of the way he considered he had been treated.

"It's the first time I have been given a treat like this," remarked the irrepressible Bertie. "It's no end jolly. Do you think they'll show fight?"

"It all depends upon whether we find them there," Carminster replied. "What do you think, Mr. Inspector?"

"They're in a cleft stick, my lord. I should not be at all surprised if we have some trouble with them. But that does not matter, so long as we secure them."

The cab passed Blackfriars, turned into Cornhill, and made its way through Moorgate Street until it reached Finsbury Pavement.

"If you have no objection, my lord, we'll stop here," said Dunsford. "It would be much better for us to walk up to the house."

"Arrange matters as you think best," Carminster replied. "I am in your hands entirely."

The cab was accordingly stopped, and they alighted. Carminster looked at his watch and found that the time was just half-past two.

"This is an early morning call with a vengeance," he remarked, as he stepped on to the pavement.

The other three men having alighted, they bade the cabman wait for them, and then, led by the inspector, they proceeded in the direction of the alley which Carminster had indicated. As they approached it a figure more like a scarecrow than a man emerged from a doorway and came towards them. It was a typical London night bird, and even Bertie Carrington recognized it as such. Dunsford, however, did not seem in the least surprised.

"Have they been out?" he asked.

"Only one of 'em, sir," the man replied, "but he came back almost at once. There's three of them in there now."

"Very good. Remain where you are until I see you again. Warn the man on the beat to stand by in case we may want him."

"Very good, sir. He'll be along in a few minutes."

"Now, gentlemen, if you're ready, we will try the house."

So saying, he led the way to the alley where Carminster had seen the men disappear. Arriving at the door he knocked upon it, for there was no bell. In silence they waited, but there was no response. Once more they hammered upon it with their fists, but still there was no surprise.

"Try once more," said the inspector, "and if they don't open then we'll burst the door in."

Again they banged upon the woodwork, but with no more success than before.

"It's no good," cried Dunsford, "we must break the door. Try a run at it!"

With experience probably born of long practice the men did as they were ordered, and a moment later the door lay upon the floor of the narrow linoleum-covered passage. There were two doors, one on the left and one at the further end. The first proved to be a small sitting-room with the remains of supper spread upon the table. The other was the kitchen. The inspector looked about him with evident disgust.

"We must try upstairs," he cried, and as he said it there was the sound of a pistol shot from the floor above. "Quickly, boys, or we may be too late!"

They needed no spurring. The excitement of the moment had gripped them hard. In less time than it takes to tell they had reached the floor above. Here they found themselves on a narrow landing out of which three doors opened. A small gas jet at the further end was the only light obtainable, and that was turned so low that it might almost as well not have been lighted at all.

On reaching the top of the stairs they paused and listened. For the moment everything was still. With the exception of a clock ticking down-stairs not a sound was to be heard. What they had to decide was from which room had come the pistol shot they had heard. They listened at each door in turn. Then one little sound gave them their clue, and the last door was broken in. Never will Carminster forget the sight that met his eyes. Huddled up in a corner, his head fallen forward on his chest, but his eyes still open, quite dead, was the little dwarf, Stourdza, while in front of the fireplace stood Matheson, alias Barraclough, revolver in hand. Against the wall opposite the window stood the man Carminster had seen at King's Cross.

"Come in," said Barraclough, for I must still call him by that name, "I have been expecting you all the evening. But as you value your lives don't approach nearer than the end of that table.

Inspector Dunsford, I've been saving you and the hangman some trouble. Do you see that little beast in the corner? I shot him two or three minutes ago, just as I intend to shoot that cur standing against the wall. No! no! don't you move, gentlemen. The first man who lifts his foot dies. My reason for delaying matters at all is this, because I have an explanation I wish to make. Inspector Dunsford, you have moved; if you do so again I pledge you my word you're a dead man. It will pay you better to listen to what I have to say than to attempt to interrupt me. As you can see, I hold the cards."

"Go on!" said Dunsford, "but be quick about it!"

"Dunsford, you need a holiday; your nerves are out of key. But to return to my story. I want to tell it as soon as I can and be done with it. By the way, Dunsford, do you remember Sir Charles Glendenning, who got into trouble over that Baccarat Case?"

"Yes! yes!" answered the inspector. "But what of that?"

"Only that I am the man. I am Charles Glendenning. It was the injustice that I was subjected to over that case that sent me to the devil; that has made me what I am to-night. I wandered about the world without caring what

became of me. Then I chanced to meet that man."

Here he pointed to the dead Stourdza in the corner.

" And he gave me my first insight into the underside of Continental politics. There was life, there was excitement in it. It gave me just the fillip I wanted. I threw myself into it heart and soul. Then it was that I met Tremayne. He was, if possible, even keener than myself. To hear him talk, one would imagine that to free the oppressed, to lift the burden of taxation from the shoulders of the poor, was his only aim and object in life. Then, and by a chance that was as providential as it was unexpected, we discovered that our philosophic friend was a traitor. The King of Rubisheim, as all the world knows, was a profligate and a scoundrel of the first water. It had been decided that he should be put out of the way. He was useless to himself and to his country. Who was more enthusiastic in the matter than Tremayne; who looked after everything, spared himself no trouble, went into every detail? Why, Tremayne! And when all was complete, and arrangements had been made for Prince Stefan to take the throne, what does Mr. Tremayne do? Why, he steals the papers and flies to England, hoping to sell them to the British Government and reap the reward of his treachery.

That was why he came to you, Lord Carminster ! Had we not forestalled him he would have obtained a letter of introduction from you to your cousin, Lord Derysforth, and on the strength of that and the fears of an European conflagration, he would have been able to make his own terms. But, by good fortune, we discovered his plot in time, and accompanied by that snivelling hound there whom I intend to shoot in a few moments, we went down to Kelston. He it was who killed him, but I was there to see that he did it. He had the papers on him when we searched him, also a letter in which he plainly stated his intention of betraying us. When he left you so suddenly in the shooting drive it was because he saw me beckoning to him. I took him down to the open space on the verge of the wood, and while I was taxing him with his treachery, this man struck him from behind with a stake that he had pulled from a hurdle. The papers once in our possession we left the neighbourhood, but we did not know how much he had told you. Our work in Rubischeim had to be carried through, but if you were cognizant of our plans it would have been useless for us to put them into practice. For that reason we abducted you. Now I think you know everything. Stand back, Dunsford. If you move another step you're a dead man. Now, there's that man ! ”

He pointed to the cowering figure against the wall.

"An honourable gentleman if ever there was one. Only this afternoon he wrote a letter to the police offering to turn King's evidence in order to save his precious life. Hadn't even the pluck to be faithful to his own villainy. And these are the men who preach the regeneration of mankind, who call themselves the friends of the poor and oppressed. Get up, you hound. You'll have enough lying down later on. Lord Carminster, I sincerely regret that you should have been drawn into this miserable affair. But your troubles are happily at an end. As I trust mine will be. Dunsford, you have done your duty, and from your point of view it is a pity that you have come too late. I went into the miserable business with my eyes open; I go out of it with my eyes shut. What is the old tag? "*Ave, Imperator! Morituri te salutant!*"

He paused for a moment, and then raised the revolver and fired. The man leaning against the wall gave a little cough and fell forward on his face. Dunsford made a quick movement round the table, but he was too late. A second shot rang out, and Barraclough dropped upon the floor, with a bullet through his brain.



A year has gone by since the events recorded in this story happened. Carminster and his wife are as happy as any two people can expect to be in this vale of tears. I am going down to stay with them next week to meet Mr. and Mrs. Carrington, who have been spending their honeymoon at Monte Carlo, and also to pay court to the future Lord Carminster, who, I am given to understand, is one of the finest infants ever born into this world.

At least that is what his mother says !

THE END

